

Latinidad and Belonging in the Latin@ Community of Central Alabama

by

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ABSTRACT

The US South has long been a transnational space. Over the past three decades, there has been a great increase in the number of people immigrating to the region from Latin America to work in poultry, timber, and other industries. Alabama has experienced a growing Latin@ population over the last thirty years. Literature on this population in Alabama focuses on health and the involvement of Latin@s in prominent state industries. Few studies seek to understand how the Latin@ community constructs belonging and community in central Alabama. In this research, I ask two questions: “What strategies do Latin@ people in central Alabama use to navigate Latinidad?” and “What strategies are Latin@ people using to navigate belonging in central Alabama?” The data for this study came from interviews ($n=24$) with members of the Latin@ community in central Alabama, as well as 40 hours of participant witnessing. Through this research, I identified heterogeneous strategies Latin@ people used to navigate their own construction of Latinidad as well as the strategies Latin@ community members practiced to cultivate belonging in central Alabama. I find that Latinidad is practiced with multiple cultural nuances, shaped by common cultural experiences that create a shared identity. I investigate people’s perspectives on work and Latinidad to explore these cultural nuances in relation to strategy used to relate to Latinidad. In addition, despite barriers to doing so, Latin@ people find ways to experience and practice belonging in the US South. I show how familismo and commensality act as culturally specific practices that cultivate feelings of belonging. I use the metaphor of a trellis to explore the ways that these practices support the cultivation of feelings of belonging.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this thesis / dissertation, no Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As of the 2020 census, Latin@s accounted for 5% of the state population, but 32% of state population growth (Spencer 2023). While current political rhetoric and media coverage tend to focus on Latin@ immigration, 65% of Latin@s in Alabama are US citizens (Spencer 2023). In 2007, a statewide report was issued on the Hispanic Cultures of Alabama (Prado 2007), yet there has been scant research investigating the lived experiences of Latin@s¹ in Alabama, especially central Alabama.

To address this gap in the literature, I explore two research questions in this thesis. First, “what strategies do Latin@ people in central Alabama use to navigate Latinidad?” and “What strategies are Latin@ people using to navigate belonging in central Alabama?” To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews ($n=24$) and participant witnessing (40 hours) (Tracy 2020). Alongside generating data, I kept analytical memos to reflexively engage with the research process and emerging themes. I analyzed my data using grounded theory (Charmaz 2008), allowing themes to emerge from the data during the data generation process. I conducted this research within a Chicana/Latina feminist values system (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021), centering the voices of my participants and being attentive to each participant's experiences.

¹ While ‘Hispanic’ is not a gendered term in English, the group name ‘Latino’ is a gendered term. Spanish is a gendered language (male/female), and by referring to the group by the masculine, which is a grammatical convention, this covers female and non-binary gender identifications and seemingly erases them. Terms like ‘Latinx’ emerged to challenge assumptions made by the title ‘Latino,’ by creating space for ambiguity and further question making (Salinas Jr 2020). While this term became popular in activist and academic spaces, its cross-group adoption is still mixed as it can difficult to translate the meaning as well as its attachment to academia can make it feel distant from people’s lived experiences (Salinas Jr 2020; Torres 2018). In this study, I use the term ‘Latin@’ to reflect language used among my participants as well as complicate the binary understanding which comes with the term ‘Latino.’

In this thesis, I examine how Latin@ residents of central Alabama interact with Latinidad through their perceptions of value, specifically in relation to work. Though dominant narratives existed among participants about Latinidad and work, participants drew on heterogeneous wells of value to define their relation to work as related to Latinidad. Further, I draw on the metaphor of a trellis to explore how the cultural values of familismo and commensality shape feelings of belonging in central Alabama. I use the metaphor of a trellis as it draws on imagery common to the US South, the trellis of the muscadine and scuppernong, as well as reflects the often hidden processes that shape how feelings grow. From these analyses, I draw conclusions on future research and directions.

In the following chapters, I detail my research process and findings. In Chapter 2, I summarize the existing literature on Latinidad and belonging. In Chapter 3, I describe my research methods and my positionality. In Chapter 4, I present my research findings, organized into two sections that relate to the themes of Latinidad and belonging. I follow this with a discussion of the findings and calls for future research. In Chapter 5, I summarize my findings and this thesis.

CHAPTER 2: EXPLORING LATINIDAD AND BELONGING IN THE LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I draw on literature related to the themes that emerged from my data analysis (Charmaz 2008). I begin by investigating Latinidad as a dynamic social construct. Latinidad, as an identity, is informed both by those who identify as Latin@ as well as by those outside the group. I seek to draw on literature that situates the evolution of the identity in the US and how Latin@s use values, such as labor, to strategically navigate life in the US. I also investigate the literature around belonging. I review literature on belonging as a concept and the ways that belonging is studied among Latin@s in the US South as 'El Nuevo South.' Based on themes that emerged in data analysis (Charmaz 2008), I identify familismo and commensality as culturally relevant practices which trellis feelings of belonging. In this review, I draw on literature which describes these practices and their dimensions.

LATIN@ IDENTITY: LATINIDAD AS A DYNAMIC SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

In this thesis, I work from the understanding that Latinidad today is theorized as the dynamic identity construction of Latin@ peoples in diasporic communities of people of different nationalities, generations, genders, races, and immigration statuses (Cohn 2010; Golash-Boza 2006; Golash-Boza and Darity Jr 2008; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021; Vargas, Valle, and Dhuman 2025; (Ruiz-Manrique, Hirschhorn-Martinez, and Sáez 2026). In spite of this richness of

experience, Latinidad is often spoken of in essentialized terms, or terms which promote one idea of Latinidad as the more true than other aspects or contradictions, both within and outside the Latin@ community (Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012; Pfeffer 1998; Vargas et al. 2025). This essentialization tends to highlight certain perceived positive or negative traits of Latin@ people, such as the narrative that Latin@s are hard workers and want material success (Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012) or that Latin@ immigration leads to more criminal activity (Crowley and Ebert 2014). The ways that Latin@ people are essentialized can evolve based on group identification within the group as well as how other groups speak about Latin@s (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021).

As Latin@s are a racialized group in the US, depictions of Latin@s, as in the media, tend towards certain phenotypes that overlook racial hierarchies and dynamics of Latin America (Cohn 2010; Feliciano 2016; Vargas et al. 2025). These representations often erase groups like indigenous peoples and Afrolatinos (Kovats Sánchez 2021; Nieves-Pizarro 2018) as well as neglect how whiteness and European colonialism still defines much of Latin America (Galeano 2004; Sowards 2021; Vallejo and Vasquez-Tokos 2024a; Vargas et al. 2025). As Latinidad is a racialized category in the US, it is important to understand how this racialization informs both identity among Latin@s (Golash-Boza 2006; Golash-Boza and Darity Jr 2008) as well as how Latin@s move in US society in order to establish lives as they are shaped, and reshape, the culture (Atilés and Bohon 2003; Avila-Saavedra 2011; Camargo, Ramos, and Bennett 2022; Escobar 2021). Though critics point to these essentializations as difficulties in trying to subsume too many people into one category, the term Latin@ is nonetheless helpful in describing a growing population in the US, shaped by interactions with the US border (Anzaldúa 2012; Golash-Boza and Darity Jr 2008; Lacayo 2017).

HEGEMONIC LATINIDAD: DOMINANT NARRATIVES SHAPING LATINIDAD

Hegemonic Latinidad is a dynamic construct that represents dominant narratives related to Latin@, which impact how Latin@ people live their lives (Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012). In response to Latin@ racialization in the US in the 1960s, movements emerged to counter racialized narratives produced by white people and institutions through labor organizing and solidarity-building with the Latin@ community (Anzaldúa 2012; Gutiérrez 2010). These movements fostered a sense of pride and visibility, grounded in an emerging shared cultural identity, while also countering racist and xenophobic narratives that sought to minimize Latin@ identity (Gutiérrez 2010; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021). Still, representations within the Latin@ community fell short of representation of all its assumed members (Morales 2021; Moreira 2025).

As the Chicano movement worked to empower Latin@ people in the US through protests and increased visibility, its male leadership often led to Latina interests being overlooked or marginalized (Anzaldúa 2012; Gutiérrez 2010; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021). The Chicana movement attempted to remedy this shortcoming by providing a voice to the experience of Chicanas in the US, imagined as the ‘new mestiza consciousness’ (Anzaldúa 2012). This group sought to build solidarity among those called the ‘Third-World Women,’ or those who come from or are defined by their relationship to the global South, or the developing world (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021). Further, this movement sought to bring attention to the ways in which sexuality also informs identity construction and how this, in turn, informs solidarity within all these movements (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021; Patrón 2021b). However, this movement also struggled to capture the diversity of Latinidad, as Anzaldúa’s ‘new mestiza’ drew on utopian imaginings of Latinidad as a mixture of races (Vasconcelos 1993). This representation of

Latinidad as only brownness continued the longstanding oversight of blackness in Latin America (Moreira 2025; Nieves-Pizarro 2018). This difficulty in creating narratives of Latinidad that reflect all of the assumed members often leads to hegemonic ideas of Latinidad, meaning that one group, or certain traits or attitudes, associated with Latinidad becomes the most visible and dominant representation for the whole group (Feliciano 2016; Golash-Boza and Darity Jr 2008; Vallejo and Vasquez-Tokos 2024b). As seen in the discussion of Chicano and Chicana movements, Latin@ people actively participate in the construction and contradiction of hegemonic Latinidad (Gutiérrez 2010; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021).

The discussion of who is Latin@ and who is not is not only a trait of Latinidad in the US, but also in Latin America . Latin America is a transnational space defined by centuries of settler colonialism, which has not led to a mixed society in which skin color is only marginally important (Galeano 2004; Vasconcelos 1993), but rather a racialized society that is ruled by Eurocentrism and whiteness (Galeano 2004; Golash-Boza and Bonilla-Silva 2013; Quijano 2000). Still, Latinidad is a useful category for understanding experiences and identity (Golash-Boza and Darity Jr 2008; Vargas et al. 2025). Latinidad informs how people live their daily life, especially in diasporic settings, like those of the Southern US, as Latin@ people's identity is often made clearer by their out-group status compared to the majority groups, whites, as well as their outsider standing compared to other minority groups, like blacks (Basok and George 2021; Boccagni and Vargas-Silva 2021; Licea 2020; Vargas et al. 2025). This is especially true in relation to whiteness in the US, as, generally, white society in the US does not look equally on Latin@ neighbors, and this shapes the power imbalance between white people and Latin@ people (Lacayo 2017).

Discussions on Hegemonic Latinidad also extend to the group identifier “Hispanic/Latino,” though this is not the only term used to name this group (Cohn 2010). These terms are used interchangeably in official and everyday contexts and generally refer to a person of Latin American origin (Golash-Boza 2006; Portes and MacLeod 1996). In addition, national identifiers can serve as important markers of identity, especially among first-generation immigrants (Portes and MacLeod 1996). Yet, in US society, especially with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in the 1960s, ‘Latino’ and ‘Hispanic’ were deemed as terms that could communicate the emergence of this group in the US racial hierarchy (Flores-Hughes 2006).

Labor & Latinidad: Neoliberalism, Morals, and Navigating US Labor Laws

In negotiating identity in the US, Latinidad exists between the tensions of inclusion and exclusion, depending on the context. While racism in the US, especially state-enforced exclusion from the criminalization of immigration, acts as an exclusionary force, labor can act as a force for inclusion (Dovidio et al. 2010; Hallett 2012). As many Latin@s choose to immigrate to the US for economic reasons, their ability to work and find success is a key component of Latinidad in the US (Armijos-Orellana et al. 2022). Labor migration to the US from Latin America, especially Mexico, has a long history, including both sanctioned and unsanctioned worker cross-border migration (Galeano 2004). During times of national crisis, like World War II, the US has relied heavily on Latin@ immigrants to fill labor needs (Mandee 2014). Programs like the Bracero program reflect how Latin@s are viewed in terms of their labor potential, as the program was in place during the war, but ended after it (Mandee 2014). In the modern economic system, Latinidad has become the source for cheap labor, which powers the US economy (Clemens 2022; Jewell 2025; Popke 2011b). However, to keep labor cheap, the government

heavily polices this immigrant labor to keep communities living in fear (Ewing, Martínez, and Rumbaut 2015; Landale, Oropesa, and Noah 2017). While Latin@ immigrants provide much-needed support to domestic US industries, their treatment reflects a lack of value being placed on their bodies as people, rather than workers (Benson 2011; McDaniel and Casanova 2003a; Salinas 2024).

Related to this imagining of Latinidad and labor, Latin@s are viewed as having a strong work ethic, and that they want to work (Hallett 2012; Salinas 2024). This narrative can positively and negatively affect the community (Flippen and Farrell-Bryan 2021; Hallett 2012).

Conversely, the perception of Latin@s as having a strong work ethic gives them a moral claim against other groups perceived as lacking that work ethic. For example, Latin@ laborers are looked upon positively and are employed in areas where there are labor pools present, but these labor pools are identified with blackness or ‘White trash’ (Hallett 2012; McDaniel and Casanova 2003a). Often, these are rural spaces that rely on labor-intensive, extractive industries. In these spaces, Latinidad can represent a positive force in revitalizing economies viewed as left behind (Crowley and Ebert 2014; Hallett 2012; Nelson and Hiemstra 2008; Walter 2021a). However, due to the difficulties of immigration and finding work, Latin@ immigrants are reliant on the jobs they are able to get, especially when lacking legal status in the US (Abbasi 2025; Benson 2011). Employers can take advantage of people’s situation and keep them working long shifts and in poor conditions (Benson 2011; Salinas 2024).

BELONGING: DEFINING THE FEELING

Belonging is a key element of human thriving (VanderWeele et al. 2025). I use the conceptualization of belonging in this thesis, which is that belonging is “the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences” (Allen et al. 2021). In other words, belonging is the feeling that a person is valued and respected in a place and that this place and its people reflect back to them their values, characteristics, or beliefs. As the sociological study of emotions is an emerging phenomenon (Kemper 1978), the conceptualization of belonging and frameworks for its understanding are evolving (Allen et al. 2021; Antonsich 2010; Mahar and and Stuart 2013; Marshall 2002).

Cultivating belonging is not merely being in a new place, but the ability to connect with the place, opportunities to do so, motivation, and positive experience (Allen et al. 2021). All of this is also informed by one's social, cultural, and environmental experiences, as well as the narratives they carry within themselves and how they relate to others. The process of immigration and acculturation to a new location can lead people to experience varying levels of identification, well-being, and place attachment (Basok and George 2021). For immigrants, belonging is an especially salient experience, as they have often left land and family behind to cross a border in hopes of perceived opportunities (Anzaldúa 2012; Armijos-Orellana et al. 2022). As immigrants negotiate the tension in their own lives between acculturation, adaptation, and assimilation (Golash-Boza 2006), people find dynamic ways to exist in their new place and in relation to their place of origin (Hadjiyanni and Helle 2008; Walter 2021b). In that regard, the Latin@ immigrant community of the US South faces unique hurdles, such as a complex, place-specific labor and racial history, to cultivating belonging as well as opportunities to remake the region (Popke 2011a).

EL NUEVO SOUTH: HOW LATIN@ IMMIGRATION IS RESHAPING A REGION

The visible demographic shift of Latin@ immigration has led to the discussion of a new ‘New South’ – ‘El Nuevo South’ which recognizes the ways that Latin@s transform culture and place in the US South (Guerrero 2017; Popke 2011a; Prado et al. 2007; Spencer 2023; Stuesse 2016; Thompson 2023, 2024; Walter 2021b). After the destruction of the US South during the Civil War, the elimination of the slave system, which enriched the US Southern elite, the former confederacy searched for a new way to recruit investment (Bateman 2023). However, though the US South did begin to industrialize, the region did not move past its previous societal structure built on white supremacy and labor exploitation (Benson 2011; McDermott and Ferguson 2022). In the present day, the US South, specifically the rural South, has been faced with a population influx that challenges this White/ Black narrative: Latin@s (Crowley and Ebert 2014; Marrow 2009). Driven by economic distress, regional violence, and perceptions of the ‘American Dream’ (Armijos-Orellana et al. 2022; Crowley and Ebert 2014; Flippen and Farrell-Bryan 2021; Popke 2011), Latin@ peoples find economic opportunity and space to create community in the US South (Brodbeck et al. 2018; Kandel et al. 2011; Walter 2021). While experiences of immigration and the transnationalism of the US South are not new phenomena (Horevitz 2009; Jewell 2025), Latin@ visibility in the region has risen consistently since the 1990s, as Latin@s come to make up a larger proportion of the population (Spencer 2023; Tafoya 2005).

This ‘Nuevo South’ is shaped by Latinidad’s relation to labor. As Black people in the US South were valued by the landed elite as a source of cheap labor (Bateman 2023), narratives of Latinidad in the US South are often shaped by how they fill jobs passed over by domestic-born workers (Casanova and McDaniel 2005; Walter 2021). This often looks like labor-intensive jobs

in forestry, poultry, and factories (Clemens 2022; Winders 2011). Despite the physical demands of these jobs, Latin@ people are often willing to fill these roles for the financial benefits they can bring to their families (Brodbeck et al. 2018). This comes in the form of remesas, or remittances, which contributed upwards of \$161 billion to Latin American and Caribbean nations in 2024, mostly from the US (Gerbaud 2025).

The Southern economy formally participates in the importation of migrant labor through the H-2B visa program, which allows migrants to come to work in industries with unmet labor needs (Blinn et al. 2021; McDaniel and Casanova 2003). While companies speak to how they otherwise would not be able to fill the jobs that migrants fill, they bring migrant workers into areas of persistent poverty, often predominantly Black communities (McDaniel and Casanova 2003). Though H-2B visas provide a legally authorized way to work in the US, the process is littered with complications and potentials for abuse (Benson 2011; Clemens 2022). Further, migrant work programs such as this often put migrant peoples in a sort of limbo as they are often isolated from greater society during their work (Basok and George 2021).

Though migrant work programs offer one path to access the financial resources of the US, many Latin@ people choose to immigrate to the US to create a new life (Crowley and Ebert 2014). This can look like the immigration of individuals or entire families, creating new communities in locations where work is available to support those who choose to immigrate (Smith and Winders 2008). As people live in these spaces, they physically reshape their environment, opening businesses, playing sports, and trying to navigate their place in the local culture (Cuadros 2011; Escobar 2021; Walter 2021). However, in relating themselves to place, many Latin@s experience a ‘Liminal Belonging,’ the tension that a person feels in participating in a place but not feeling that all of one’s identity is welcome / is reflected in that place .

LIMINAL BELONGING: BEING BETWEEN PLACES

Though the Southern US is perceived as being home to hospitable people, hence the term ‘southern hospitality,’ many structural conditions exist to marginalize Latin@ people and Latin@ immigrants. This structural discrimination against Latin@s limits people’s abilities to gain cultural competencies, connect with others who live in Alabama, and leads to negative interactions. Yet, Latin@ people not only continue to exist in the US South, but are actively reshaping what it looks like and what it means to be of the US South (Camargo et al. 2022; Escobar 2021; MacNell et al. 2017; Popke 2011a; Walter 2021a). This is enabled by cultural structures, like familismo, the high value placed on family in Latin@ homes, and commensality, the sharing of meals and food practice, which build resiliency in Latin@ communities (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017; Jönsson, Michaud, and Neuman 2021; Patrón 2021b; Saldivar-tanaka and Krasny 2004). Further, as people moving to a new place, there is an existing interest in learning and adopting cultural practices of that place (Armijos-Orellana et al. 2022; Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012; Walter 2021a).

Commensality: Food Practice as Memory and Cultural Practice

Eating not only serves an important biological function, but also serves as a focal point for social interaction and community building. (Jönsson et al. 2021; Kniffin et al. 2015; Sobal and Nelson 2003). This social dimension of food practice is termed commensality, a practice I highlight among the Latin@ community in central Alabama (Jönsson et al. 2021; Sobal and Nelson 2003). Across cultures, sharing a meal serves to connect people to their cultural practices

(Balvanera et al. 2025; Ely et al. 2001). Latin America is home to a diversity of commensal traditions, and throughout the diversity there is an intense focus on the gathering, which makes the meal (Balvanera et al. 2025; Pastor 2004; Sánchez et al. 2024). As people from Latin America immigrate to the US, they bring these practices of commensality with them (Fish, Brown, and Quandt 2015; Flora et al. 2011; Hadjiyanni and Helle 2008; Waskul, Vannini, and Wilson 2009). These practices of commensality serve to both maintain a connection to a past place while also incorporating an important identity element to a new place (Hadjiyanni and Helle 2008).

Food is an evocative experience, often bringing a person back to specific memories related to eating or cooking a certain dish (Weller and Turkon 2015). Further, culinary narratives help inform a person's construction of identity both in relation to nation and land (Bak-Geller Corona 2013; Balvanera et al. 2025; Sánchez et al. 2024). Simply put, where people travel, their food travels with them. This is true of the Latin@ immigrant experience. Latin American countries have rich culinary traditions, often mixed between colonial and indigenous food practices (Balvanera et al. 2025). As Latin@ people immigrate, food and its shared consumption provide a tangible connection to a place that they have left behind (Hadjiyanni and Helle 2008). Often, this takes place in one's kitchen, which is fitted to make the foods that will not only feed the individual but also their family and those they invite to share a meal (Hadjiyanni and Helle 2008). More than only a connection back to the place from which they immigrated, food builds bridges for living in the US (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004). The growing, cooking, and sharing of food all become spaces to share cultural knowledge and practice among Latin@ people, though those practices may have various nuances.

The food practices of Latin@ people reshape the US South, as people open more tiendas which cater to Latin@ people, gardens are started, and new restaurants emerge. While the Southern US has long been home to a number of transnational food practices due to colonizer, indigenous, and enslaved people's interactions (Halloran 2012), Latin@ immigration to the US South has reshaped the physical food landscape (Fish et al. 2015; Janda et al. 2024; Smith and Winders 2008; Trudeau 2006). This new food landscape is important in reflecting back Latin@ identity as experienced through food, a structural element of their community (MacNell et al. 2017; Smith and Winders 2008; Walter 2021a). This transformation also informs how Latin@ people relate to their identities transforming through interaction with the US South (Lopez 2020). Rather than being passive in their reception of Southern US food culture or exclusive their practice of food and food sharing, Latin@ people in the US South dynamically engage in their food systems in a manner that reflects themselves (Fish et al. 2015; Lopez 2020).

Familismo: The Opportunities and Vices of the Value of Family

In Latin@ culture, the immediate family is often the main source of support for members of the family (Patrón 2021a; Steidel and Contreras 2003). These strong feelings of identification and support in the Latin@ community among family are termed familismo (Patrón 2021a; Stein et al. 2015). Though familism can be an important value in many cultures, it is especially salient for Latin@s in the US, as family can be the only source of support in a foreign culture, as with participants in this study (Stein et al. 2015). Familismo emphasizes interdependence among members to ensure people's needs are taken care of, a value that carries over into romantic partnerships in which Latin@s are involved (Campos, Perez, and Guardino 2016). While US culture generally promotes individuality and prioritizes individual needs, familismo is unique

among Latin@s, as family needs are valued above individual needs (Stein et al. 2015). This focus on family is consistent among the Latin@ community, yet the ways in which the value is expressed can vary from financial support to shared activities to childcare to help immigrating (Calzada, Tamis-LeMonda, and Yoshikawa 2013; Steidel and Contreras 2003).

Familismo, in the literature, is commonly investigated in terms of how familism informs parent-child relations and the ways that familismo affects educational outcomes. Schooling and educational achievement is viewed as important for building a successful life in the US (Cortez, Martinez, and Sáenz 2014; Gonzalez 2015; Matos 2015; Patrón 2021a). However, Latin@ students often face discrimination and other barriers for achievement in the classroom which do not value their cultural knowledge, such as knowing multiple languages and being multicultural (Dovidio et al. 2010; Landale et al. 2017; Matos 2015; Perreira, Fuligni, and Potochnick 2010). While these sources of knowledge can be viewed as deficits in school systems not equipped to support Latin@ youth, school systems can adapt to serve Latin@ youth by stepping into their sources of knowledge rather than away. Familismo is identified as a culturally available support to aid students in finding success in the classroom as well as using that success to get college degrees (Lopez and Donovan 2009; Matos 2015). By engaging families alongside their students, schools can create atmospheres which encourage parents to partner alongside their children and equip parents with the relevant knowledge and skills they need to support their students, whether that is through family learning nights or replicating familial like environments when family is far away (Lopez and Donovan 2009; Matos 2015).

In addition to parent-child relations in terms of education, familismo also affects family dynamics related to gender and family well-being. In Latin@ families, men are often seen as the heads of the family unit, though mothers often carry the load of raising the family (Cuadros

2011; Mayo 1997; Perrotte and Zamboanga 2021). While gender roles are dynamic and one person can inhabit multiple roles, notions of traditional gender roles within the family contribute to how family members respond to stressors from their family position, with the family as a strong shared identity (Perrotte and Zamboanga 2021). Men's role, in families, is often characterized as machismo, which brings with it ideas of domination and heavy substance use (Mayo 1997; Perrotte and Zamboanga 2021). Women, on the other hand, are expected to play into the role of the idyllic caretaker, termed marianismo (Cortez et al. 2014). The salience of these cultural ideas can be seen in discussions of queerness among Latin@ families. Especially among men, the coming out process can be dangerous as it threatens cultural ideas of masculinity (Gerena 2023; Patrón 2021a, 2021b). Though some parents are able to rework their understandings of gender to parent their queer children, the need to rework familismo in order to parent their children with unconditional love and respect highlights how the concept can be restrictive in the first place (Abreu et al. 2020). In addition, familismo can create tensions between individual and family identity, especially among youth in the US (Zayas et al. 2005). As Latin@ families acculturate to the US, differing levels of acculturation can create familial tensions and conflict between parents and children. As Latina youth often identify more with familismo, harsh parenting and inflexibility as Latinas explore their own identity development can lead to conflict and even suicide attempts (Peña et al. 2011; Zayas et al. 2005). Even as familismo can provide a supportive and nurturing environment for children, it is a multidimensional concept that can also be restrictive for children who wander outside of how the family understands their shared identity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I investigate two research questions: “What strategies do Latin@ people in central Alabama use to navigate Latinidad?” and “What strategies are Latin@ people using to navigate belonging in central Alabama?” To answer these questions, I used a qualitative research design. I chose this method as I was asking questions related to experience, identity, and perspective, which would not be captured on a survey instrument or in statistical reporting (Bloomberg 2023). Data for this research project were generated through semi-structured interviews ($n=24$), informant interviews ($n=16$), and participant observation (*40 hours*). In addition, I asked participants if they wanted to participate in an optional anonymous recipe book project, which I will compile and give to those who participated in this research project.

By using qualitative methods, I hoped to facilitate a horizontal exchange of knowledge (Balvanera et al. 2025; Sánchez et al. 2024) through engaging in pláticas, friendly, mutual dialogues, and casual conversations, alongside my semi-structured interviews (Fierros and Bernal 2016). I recruited participants in the central Alabama region through network and purposive sampling (Bagnasco, Ghirotto, and Sasso 2014; Glaser and Strauss 2017). I generated data between August 2025 and February 2026. Alongside data generation, I transcribed and coded interviews, which I analyzed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2008). I synthesized my findings into this thesis. My aim is that this research would extend existing knowledge on the Latin@ diaspora in Alabama, provide qualitative data on the

lived experiences of Latin@s in central Alabama (Prado et al. 2007), and challenge static representations of Latin@s in the US South.

SITE DESCRIPTION

I selected central Alabama as my research site because of my existing access to Latin@ communities in the area, as well as the lack of literature discussing Latinidad and belonging in Alabama. Alabama is home to over 264,000 Latin@ residents, accounting for 32% of the state's total population growth since the previous census (Spencer 2023). In addition, Latin@s make up 10% of school-age children in Alabama (Spencer 2023). My own identity, as well as my work in the local school system and in community organizing, made me familiar with the community of my research site, and meant many people knew or were already known to me. I have lived in central Alabama for the past six years, which has given me an awareness of how the area has evolved, the general culture, and how to navigate the community, especially given the current political climate. This awareness, along with my Spanish language abilities and my own family history, allowed me to gain entree into the community even during a time in which Latin@ peoples live in varying levels of fear due to immigration status and state-enforced racial discrimination (Ewing et al. 2015).

As I seek to protect the confidentiality of my participants (Lahman et al. 2011), an exploration of the context of this study is still warranted, as context is vital in understanding identity construction (Escobar 2021). This research was conducted in Central Alabama, a region of the US built on the exploitation of black bodies and labor to build wealth for white plantation owners (Jewell 2025; Tisby 2019). This labor relation continued well past slavery, as white power brokers in the state worked to continue the marginalization of black and poor white

workers, who often worked in resource extraction. Rural communities, especially, were made up of predominantly black and white residents until the 1990s, when Latin@ immigrants began to move in greater numbers to Alabama (Tafoya 2005). Between 1990 and 2000, Alabama saw a 208% increase in Latin@ residents, residents who moved looking for work in the state's industries (Tafoya 2005). In the region where the participants in this study live, many Latin@ immigrants find employment in factories, landscaping, or construction.

The communities I studied in central Alabama provide a unique sample of Latin@ people living amid dynamic racial relations. The community is home to a majority of white residents (70%), with black residents making up 22% percent of the population and Asian residents (4%) and Latin@ residents (6%) rounding out the county population (United States Census Bureau 2024). In the county, the poverty rate was 17% (United States Census Bureau 2024). The interstate, which ran through the county, connected residents to multiple large, metropolitan areas within a two-hour drive. The county seat and another small city were home to a majority of residents in the county, with five surrounding rural townships and a handful of rural communities. School systems were divided between city and county schools, with the city schools being significantly better funded than the county schools, as seen by their new buildings and well-funded technical education programs. In addition, the county was home to two public colleges that attracted students from across the state, the nation, and the world. Whether living in the city or in more rural parts of the county, a car was necessary for transportation, as the only public transportation served one of the local colleges. In the region, the local regional hospital was the largest single employer, followed by the county school system and a box store distribution center. Other major industries for employment included production, construction, and forestry.

Building trust in the Latin@ community during this time was not a simple task (Lahman et al. 2011). National and local news often contributes to stereotyping Latin@ peoples (Reny and Manzano 2016), a sentiment that many participants cited as a reason for not participating. For this reason, Latin@ peoples could have reason to be wary of a White presenting man associated with a government institution (Auburn University). In my experience, building trust often grew from my previous interactions and shared connections, as well as my familial story and my knowledge of the Spanish language and Latin@ culture. These previous interactions and shared connections were especially important as they were points from which to start interviews. Further, this background knowledge allowed me to ask follow-up questions in situations regarding key community events and general community sentiment.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

To protect the confidentiality of my participants during this research project, I have aggregated my demographic data to avoid any connection between the community members who shared their experiences with me and their experiences reported here (Lahman et al. 2011). For this project, I interviewed with 13 women and 13 men representing 9 nationalities across the Americas (Chile, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, United States, Venezuela). Of these people I interviewed, 22 were first generation immigrants to the United States and 4 were second generation, with at least one parent born in another American country. Interview participants had a median of 6 years living in the area with these participants having lived in central Alabama as long as 25 years and arriving as few as 8 months before being interviewed. Participants shared working in a variety of occupations. Of my participants, 10 worked in the food industry (stores and restaurants), 5 worked in business, 4

worked in construction, 2 worked in factories, 3 worked in cleaning/ maintenance services, and 2 worked as stay-at-home parents. Seven participants owned a significant part of their business or owned the business outright. Six participants worked multiple jobs. Of the 26 interview participants, 6 did not have children and 20 did have children. For those with children, participants had a median of 3 children per caretaker / partnership. I did not ask about marital status for participants because the process of immigration can create various family and caretaker relationships , which would have exceeded the scope of this research project (Cuadros 2011). I also did not ask participants' ages, but rather estimated their age by decade based on the context in each interview. The median estimated age of the participants was 30.

DATA GENERATION

The primary data source I used for this project consisted of semi-structured interviews ($n=24$) conducted with 26 Latin@ community members from August 2025 – February 2026. The Auburn University Institutional Review Board approved the proposed project, interview guide (see Appendix A), and consent documentation before the beginning of data generation (#00000642). Participant names, along with the names, locations, and businesses referenced in the interviews, were assigned a code number upon being imported into the Box folder where I stored data. In this write-up, I assigned pseudonyms to each participant. I conducted all interviews in person, at locations chosen by the participant (Kuhnlein et al. 2006). Interviews were conducted in the language chosen by the participant, either English or Spanish. Interviews had a median time of 40.5 minutes.

To recruit participants, I began with my existing network. I asked each participant if they then knew anyone else I could speak with. In order to reach participants outside of my network, I

also reached out to Latin@ serving businesses and posted a flyer (see Appendix B) on Facebook and Whatsapp. I asked each community member to sign an informed consent document before recording took place. Participation in this study was limited by the availability of participants as well as the difficulties in recruitment. I arranged interviews around people's busy lives, and I would often be at a participant's place of work or with other family members, including young children, for the interviews. In two separate interviews, I spoke with a husband and wife, as this was what they requested in meeting me. In addition, one participant told me that she did not feel comfortable recommending me to people to speak with because she did not know others' comfort level with the interview format. She stated that she spoke with me because they had been interviewed by doctors before, and this, along with their existing familiarity with me, made them comfortable.

Further, my presentation as White and institutional affiliation caused some hesitation for people in speaking with me. For example, during one interview, a man's father shouted at me as he believed my presence was threatening. Future research in this region should further interrogate the identity of the researcher in best being able to reach all parts of the community. The majority of potential participants agreed to the consent documentation process, but 16 participants did not sign the informed consent document. They shared their discomfort with signing official paperwork as their reason for not signing. I did not record these conversations or count them as semi-structured interviews. However, I did write field notes about the general themes we discussed during these interactions, which I coded and used in the development of my themes. For participants who consented to be interviewed and recorded, I transcribed the interviews using Rev, a transcription software program. I used its AI transcription feature, which I then edited for mistakes. My interview questions focused on the participant's

perspective and experiences living in central Alabama. I imported these transcripts into MAXQDA to be coded.

I used participant witnessing as a secondary data source. I conducted 40 hours of recorded participant witnessing. I use the term participant witnessing to describe the embodied experience of bearing witness to those involved with this research project, rather than observing in a passive role (Tracy 2020). In other words, I recognize that my presence impacted each scene in which I found myself, and in my field notes, I reflect on this experience, as my notes and this thesis bear witness to moments in lives which often go unseen. As I went about my daily activities, I memoed after experiences in predominantly Latin@ spaces, such as going to the grocery store, playing soccer, and being invited for dinner with Latin@ community members, as well as memoing when attending public community events in the area. By memoing, I actively reflected throughout my research process, writing about my own internal experiences as I documented details I witnessed in community life. I coded these notes and memos alongside my interviews.

The third data source for this project was the recipes (see Appendix C for examples), which I collected during my interviews. At the beginning of each interview, in reviewing the informed consent document, I would also explain the *recetario* (*recipe* book) project (Sánchez et al. 2024). I explained that this was an optional part of the project, that I planned to give out a collection of recipes as a thank you for participation (Balvanera et al. 2025; Strand et al. 2024). While not all people participated, many people did ($n=11$). These recipes and the stories which went with them added richness to my data by giving people an opportunity to reflect on a tangible practice in their experience by having them call to mind a specific food and

preparation. Often this involved reference to one's family or culture of origin. The recipes which were provided were then coded alongside the other data sources for this project.

DATA ANALYSIS

My coding approach was informed by grounded theory (Charmaz 2008). Throughout the research process, I returned to investigating literature on emerging themes, themes that I noted in analytical memos. This investigation into existing theory, along with already generated interview data, informed the interviews that followed. When I began coding, I began with open coding of the data, paying attention to emerging themes and commonalities across interviews (Saldaña 2025). Also, I kept coding memos, which I used to compare my emerging themes to my own perspective as well as my knowledge of the community. I wrote these coding memos after engaging in coding for this thesis as well as after community interactions which were relevant to understanding emerging themes. After open coding, I began coding structurally and using value-based coding. I used these coding rounds to compare to the themes I had been noticing throughout the research process, grounding abstract or discrete data in my evolving understanding. I then clustered my codes, allowing themes to emerge from the data.

POSITIONALITY

In any qualitative research, reflection on the self is warranted, and I recognize the need to critically reflect on my relationship to the participants and the subject matter at hand (Juárez and Termini Ibarra 2025; Patnaik 2013). I am a person of raices mexicanos (*Mexican descent*), of Spanish, Indigenous, and Mexican descent, a heritage which was often remembered by family members, especially my grandfather. For this reason, I wanted to learn Spanish from a young

age, though I had to learn it in school as we spoke English in the home. My grandfather did not teach my dad Spanish because my dad grew up in the 1960s surrounded by White people, so says my grandfather. I am also a person of West German, Irish, Scandinavian, and Scottish descent, though I am largely disconnected from my histories related to these heritages, as they were not actively remembered by my family. I grew up a US citizen in the Southeast US. Being white-skinned, I am assumed to be white until people know my name. I see that my interests, my parents, and my school setting put me around and kept me around predominantly White peers and White culture. At the same time that this informed my youth, family dinners, histories, and interactions reminded me of my raices mexicanos. It was not until I moved to central Alabama that I began to engage more with my Hispanicity.

My interaction with the Latin@ community came through this exploration of my own Hispanicity. When I moved to central Alabama, I began to frequent tiendas to buy my groceries. Later, when I was employed at a rural high school, I worked beyond my role as a teacher's assistant to work with Spanish-speaking youth, as they had scarce existing supports to make their way in the school. Building relationships with these young people and their families led me to be more engaged in advocacy work in the school. During a leadership transition in the school system, this advocacy work led me to take an opportunity to study my master's degree at Auburn University. At the same time, I became more involved in grassroots organizing around food systems in the Latin@ community. Further, I connected with more college-educated Latin@s through university groups and with more community members through soccer and the church where I attended.

I approached my research with Chicana feminist values, as I draw influence from Chicana and feminist writers such as Rosario Morales, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde

(Anzaldúa 2012; Lorde 2021; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021; Morales 2021). This values system puts emphasis on the need to engage with the power dynamics that govern how people are able to live and move in the US (Ramírez and Rios 2022). This framework works with the understanding that colonialization has deeply affected how people are able to express themselves and find wholeness (Anzaldúa 2012; Galeano 2004). As such, there is a need for researchers to interrogate their own place in the generation of knowledge (Fierros and Bernal 2016). Rather than knowledge for academia, knowledge needs to be for the people from whom the knowledge is generated (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021). The perspectives of these authors guided me to more self-reflexive analysis through memoing and conversation among similarly minded peers as well as guiding my research interests overall.

I recognize that my engagement with the Latin@ community is shaped by my sense of self and my experiences. While I share some characteristics, perspectives, and experiences with the people who participated in this research, I recognize many of the differences and privileges I bring to my research. As a male, White-skinned, native English-speaking U.S. citizen with a college education born in the culture where I live, I have privilege related to my relation to institutions, financial resources, and my ability to move freely. As I learned Spanish as a second language, this also influenced how I interacted with participants and analyzed their interview data. I recognize that sometimes my mind wants to translate literally between languages in ways that overlook idiom and metaphor. Being aware of this, I asked friends for thoughts on translations as well as taking edits on translations from other Spanish speakers. In addition, I recognize that place and belonging are important constructs for myself. I kept in-process memos to reflect on my felt tensions as a research instrument and to be reflective of how I was thinking as I analyzed my data.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

To many of the Latin@ people that I spoke with in these interviews, there was a consensus that the largest population group in the area were Guatemalans and the fastest growing were Venezuelans. From informant conversations, these groups seemed to work mostly in construction and in factories, respectively. However, there is no concrete data to back up this observation. I note this here to say that, as I believe my data represents Latin@ perspectives and experiences in central Alabama, I also understand that certain nationalities may not be proportionally represented to the populations that they make up here and this delimitation needs to be noted. However, this is a difficult task as there is no current way to know the actual demographic makeup of the Latin@ community, another challenge in engaging with this community.

Further, a delimitation of this study is that there are many worthwhile areas of investigation in relation to Latinidad and the Latin@ experience in the US that are outside the scope of this study. While my participants speak to immigration, gender, parenthood, sexuality, and more, I do not conduct my analysis looking to understand how these variables may affect participants' experience of identity or belonging. This is an opportunity for future research to conduct more intersectional analysis as well as investigate these areas of research on their own.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

To elucidate on the experience of Latinidad in central Alabama, I first analyze how Latin@s are experiencing Latinidad through participants' dynamic relation to work and their definition of success. In the second section, I explore how people practice belonging to central Alabama through practices of familismo and commensality. I draw on participant data to show how their practices act as a trellis to developing feelings of belonging. I follow this with a discussion of the findings in the final section.

NOSOTROS LATINOS: LATINIDAD IN CENTRAL ALABAMA

A common refrain when a participant felt they were expressing a sentiment shared among Latin@s was the phrase “nosotros, Latinos.” This phrase signified that whatever statement followed, in the eyes of the participant, this phrase should apply to all others in the Latin@ community. This perspective was not always wrong, as many commonalities emerged among Latin@ community members from all backgrounds. However, these statements often lacked the nuance that, while all participants identified as Latin@, what Latin@ meant in practice to each person reflected their own unique relation to Latinidad, to being in the US, and being in relation to those around them. These perspectives reflected the fact that Latinidad in the US is a dynamic identity that reflects people coming from different nations with different skin colors and cultures as they navigate their place in the US social hierarchy (Vargas et al. 2025). This nuance was

further informed by the current government and rhetoric regarding Latin@ immigrants (Ewing et al. 2015).

Participants often expressed, overtly or implicitly, that they perceived a certain way of understanding Latinidad: that Latin@s have certain characteristics, traits, passions, or traumas. While Latinidad is often understood in opposition to whiteness (Golash-Boza and Bonilla-Silva 2013; Lacayo 2017) and separate from blackness (Moreira 2025), group defining traits are difficult to point to, as the group title attempts to capture so much diversity (Licea 2020). However, Latinidad is a dynamic concept, and participants shared how interactions with these groups shaped and informed their own strategies of relating to their identity. To answer my research question of “What strategies Latin@ people use in central Alabama to identify with Latinidad?” I discuss how participants spoke about, related to, and experienced ideas of Latinidad in relation to work as they lived in central Alabama.

LABOR AND LATINIDAD

In this research work, participants shared perspectives that related work with their understanding of Latinidad in central Alabama. All participants who immigrated to Alabama voiced that they moved to the US to look for better financial opportunities, and they believed that by hard work, they could achieve that financial success. Leila, a first-generation immigrant from Mexico, stated, “Pues si trabajas, pues tienes para comprarte lo que te guste” (*Well, if you work you can buy yourself what you like.*) Throughout the research process, work, and hard work, came up as themes that defined or challenged Latinidad as it was experienced in Alabama.

Haz lo Mismo: Narratives of Success and Hard work

Umberto grew up in business from an early age: “En México, yo vendé paletas como de las de hielo, salía de mi escuela, iba a la a la fábrica donde los hacían. Y ahí empezaba a vender.” (*In Mexico, I sold pops, like ice pops, I left school and went to the factory where they made them. And there I started selling.*) He spoke about how he enjoyed selling and learning how to operate a successful business. However, his pop business was not enough to sustain him financially as he got older. When he graduated high school, he was left without opportunities for more education or opportunities for work: “Era difícil porque no el gobierno no te apoyaba tanto.” (*It was difficult because the government didn't help you very much.*) Umberto acknowledges that there are now more economic opportunities and even universities in the area where he grew up, but these opportunities did not exist 25 years ago when he chose to leave Mexico and come to the US.

While Jessie did not share the same love for business as Umberto, she nonetheless felt economic pressures to move to the US. When I asked her what made her embark on a months-long trip with her teenage daughter, which hinged only on the possibility of making it into the US, she said, “Mire, principalmente es por el tema económico. Inicialmente por el tema económico.” (*Look, mainly it's economic. Starting, it was for economic reasons.*) Though she was educated at the university level in Chile and worked as a social worker, she stated, “siendo profesional ya y no tenía casi trabajo ya era prácticamente imposible en Chile.” (*Being a professional already and almost not having work, it was practically impossible in Chile.*) Though Chile is seen as a relatively stable country in Latin America (Galeano 2004), Jessie's lived experience was that economic opportunity did not exist for her where she lived. She spoke

about the poor school conditions for her daughters and some security concerns. When her husband moved north to the US and found work, she and her daughter began the trek north as well in search of better economic opportunities.

For Kevin, his situation was not only a lack of economic opportunity but also food scarcity following the crisis in his home country, Venezuela, in 2019. After the start of the second term of Nicolas Maduro, Kevin shared how it became difficult to get food due to poor national infrastructure as well as how “en ese momento, la moneda oficial, que es el Bolívar en Venezuela, se devaluó mucho y no alcanzaba el dinero, los salarios no alcanzaban.” (*in that moment, the official currency, which is the Bolívar in Venezuela, devaluated a lot and money didn't make ends meet, salaries didn't make ends meet.*) For this reason, Kevin and his family moved from Venezuela to Ecuador, hoping to wait out the crisis in his home country. However, when the situation did not improve, and he couldn't make ends meet, he moved to the US in search of better economic opportunities.

Even as each participant comes from a different place in Latin America, their stories reflect a shared narrative of economic struggles in their home country, making it difficult to achieve what they imagine is a good standard of living. While some participants, like Umberto, were motivated by a personal interest in achieving success, others, like Jessie, were motivated to move not only for their economic survival but also for their children's. These shared narratives contribute to the idea of Hegemonic Latinidad that Latin@ immigrants come to the US in search of the material wealth they imagine being here (Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012).

Umberto leans into the narrative that his hard work enables him to enjoy the material success that he now has. While he now owns a successful taqueria, a handful of tiendas, and

wants to start his own distribution service, when he moved to the area twenty-five years ago, the Latin@ community was still small and tight-knit. At that, he worked all week in his businesses:

“Bueno, yo empecé ahí, tenía una tienda de Western wear. Botas. sombreros, todo eso que fue ahí duré un año. Y ahí este los fin de semana, yo hacía tacos en la parte detrás de la del del edificio, pero lo hacíamos en una plancha pequeña y solamente lo hacíamos los sábados y domingos.”

(Well, I began there, I had a western wear store. Boots, hats, all that that was there one year. And there on the weekends, I made tacos in the back part of the building, but we made them on a small griddle and only on Saturdays and Sundays.)

Working all week, or with only one day off, was a common experience, especially among men, in this project. Ideas of being a hard worker or liking the work were often voiced as reasons for working such long hours, as well as the pressures that Latin@s, both men and women, faced in making enough money to support a family. Though many participants came to the US looking for economic opportunities, many still struggled to pay rising rent prices or food costs. Between long hours and low pay, some people in the community, and a few participants, decided to take matters into their own hands by opening new businesses. While I was in the field, a number of new tiendas opened in my area of study, often within walking distance of existing shops.

Umberto, having worked hard to achieve his success, was less positive about the ability of others to succeed.

Umberto: La gente se emociona al ver que tú tienes un negocio y piensa que te va bien. Y mucha gente no conoce bien los negocios. Piensa que es fácil ya porque yo platico mucho de ellos y todo se quejan. O sea, pensaba que esto era más fácil que iban a ganar más dinero que no.

Antonio: ¿Qué consejo tiene usted para alguien que está empezando su negocio, especialmente como un latino o un hispano?

Umberto: Constancia, ser constante, no tienes que, o sea, yo siempre digo, si te metes, dices no tienes que retroceder. Tienes que para parlante para adelante. No tienes que ser,

tienes que estar constante. Y un importante, si se frío, se hace calor, cansado, tienes sueño, tienes hambre. O sea, tienes que estar constante.

(Umberto: The people get excited to see you have a business and they think its good for you. And many people don't know business well. They think that its easy because I chat a lot with them and they all complain. I man they thought that it would be easy going to earn more money but no.

Antonio: What advice do you have for someone that's starting their business, especially a Latino?

Umberto: Consistency. Be consistent, you don't have to, I mean, I always say, if you get in, you say you don't have to go back. You have to go forward. You don't have to be, you have to be consistent. And something important, if its cold, hot, you're tired, you're sleepy, you're hungry. I mean you have to be consistent.)

Umberto's focus on the idea that, if people want to succeed and earn more money, they should work harder, even at the expense of their physical health, relates to how a hegemonic idea, such as the hard-work mentality in the Latin@ community, is reproduced. In this quote, Umberto polices the boundary of what constitutes willingness to succeed and separates himself from those who do not have the mindset it takes. In doing so, Umberto does not see that when his business opened, there was less competition in the area, which made it much easier for his business to succeed. When I went to speak with Umberto, we met at his business, and he showed me a news article about how his restaurant lets customers order food in Spanish, rather than by number. When he opened, this was a unique offering, but now it is commonplace, an advantage he overlooks when he states that people need to work harder to achieve success.

Hard work not only serves as a status signifier within the Latin@ community, but this ideal of Latinidad also shapes how identity is constructed in relation to the US. Edwin, a first-generation immigrant from Guatemala, echoed the need for hard work. He grew up in Guatemala and worked there as a rural educator. But this did not pay what he needed to live. Coming to the US, Edwin made two journeys. The first time he came to the US, he was sent back to Guatemala.

Now, he has established himself online and also works in home remodeling. Though he lives without permanence in the US, he has been able to build material success through his online and construction businesses.

“Sí, ahorita estoy comenzando en bienes raíces, estoy comprando propiedades remodelándolas vendándolas y algunas rentándolas. Pues crecer más en eso también en ese área que es en una de las mejores para llegar al éxito hablando de de progresión, pues bienes raíces de lo mejor que eso. Aunque ahorita el gobierno no esté generando empleo y todo eso, las propiedades van subiendo, va subiendo”

(Yeah, now I am starting on real estate, I am buying properties, remodeling them, selling them and renting. Growing some in that also, in that area that's in one of the better ways to be successful speaking of progression, well good roots well the best of it. Even though the government right now isn't generating employment and all that, property goes up and up.)

By positioning his success despite the government's current failures, Edwin draws on the idea that his work is more valuable than the government's. While the government is struggling, he can make good money by working on property that always increases in value. This view reflects those of some other participants as well as views among especially young men in the community, as expressed through social media. A limitation of this study is that I did not interview more young men, especially those who work in construction, as these jobs can often be lucrative for those who dedicate their weeks to them. Through following the social media of this group, I can see that the culture that Edwin speaks to exists and deserves further investigation into their experiences of labor and Latinidad.

As Edwin compares himself to the abstract, faltering government, he goes further to compare his ability to transform his community to that of the American community. Edwin extends this to state that there are people in the area, Americans, who “no tienen la posibilidad de arreglarlas porque no tienen el dinero.” *(don't have the possibility of fixing [these houses] because they don't have the money.)* Though there are certainly poorer areas in the town he

speaks about, he generally lives in a well-to-do area. Even so, his statement reflects poorly on American communities' ability to care for themselves, necessitating an outside investor, a hardworking, successful immigrant, in order to turn the story around.

Edwin states that it is his hard work and focus that have led him to be in this position: “Yo siempre lo que le recomienda la gente enfoca en un área de un trabajo que te guste, porque ese va a ser tu camino al éxito.” (*I always recommend people to focus on one area of a job that they like, because that'll be your path to success.*) In his media brand, Edwin has built himself up as someone who took great risks to immigrate to the US. Through this brand, he makes content that offers to guide others moving to Alabama on how to immigrate, what to watch out for, and how to become successful. Edwin speaks to how he first established himself not as a content creator, but by working in the construction industry.

"Yo me enfoqué en un área de la construcción que fue la cerámica hacer showers de cerámica de tal piso. Lo aprendí. Y cuando lo aprendí, yo dije ya no puedo, ya tengo la experiencia. Voy a salir a dejar mis tarjetas y todo eso. Y así es como comencé ya. ¿Pero qué pasa si tú solo vas a la fábrica? Yo, la fábrica está bien, pero solo utiliza el dinero para crear tu propio negocio, no quedarte estancado ahí.”

(An area of construction I focused on was ceramics, making showers with ceramic floors. I learned how to do it. And when I learned, I said I can't anymore, I already have the experience. I'm going to go and leave my cards and everything. And that's how I began. But what happens if you only go to the factory? Me, the factory is good, but only to use the money to create your own business, not staying stagnant there.)

While Edwin's path to financial success was different from Umberto's, he still reflects the attitude that, through hard work, other Latin@s, his intended audience, can find success. Umberto speaks down on the rushed ambitions of others to start their own businesses, yet Edwin encourages people to leave their day jobs after they've saved up enough money to have their own business. To Edwin, this is the opportunity of the US. As he had previously worked in rural

education and made very little income, he is now able to provide for his family and grow his businesses. For others, his suggestion to follow his path assumes that everyone has the same goals in coming to the US and that they have the same abilities that enabled him to find material success. This reflects hegemonic notions of Latinidad, that Edwin's experience should be applicable to others' experience, and that his values are the same as others (Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012). Whether or not these assumptions are true, his ability to broadcast his views to others enables him to reach potential viewers.

Nos Sobra Plata: Latinidad and Balance

Similar to Jessie, Martín moved to the US in order to find better work. Originally from Honduras, he lived in a few spots before visiting a town in central Alabama and feeling an immediate connection to the space. At the time, he worked in a city in Georgia near the border for his cousin's panadería (*bakery*). But when the opportunity came to start a satellite store in the town where he now lives, he jumped on it. In the two years since he began operating his own panaderia with his sister, his business has grown from catching the occasional passerby to getting quite crowded on Saturday afternoons. The panaderia serves a diverse clientele due to its welcoming environment.

Antonio: ¿Como ves que- eso es un lugar que ustedes han creado para comunidad? ¿Ves que personas usan ese espacio para reunir?

Martín: Claro. Para compartir. Mucha gente viene con vienen en familia, en amistades, en parejas a compartir tiempo se sientan, platican.

(Antonio: How do you see- is this a space you've created for the community? Do you see that people use the space to get together?)

Martín: Of course. To share. A lot of people come with their family, friends, couples come to sit and chat.)

For Martín, the panadería brings him life because he is able to see it as a point of connection. As I spent many mornings and afternoons with a coffee and working on this project, I saw the people who would come in from a construction site to grab lunch, the young couples who would get an ice cream in the afternoon, and the people who would wander in out of curiosity, not really knowing what to expect to buy. To Martín, the US was a place where it could be difficult to connect due to people's individual focus. With Latin@s, on the other hand, "hay más como que somos más abiertos a hacia las personas que no, no conocemos" (*there is more, like we are more open towards people we don't know.*) His store creates a point of connection in which he can welcome and get to know his community. Also, he is interested in expanding to other businesses.

"Mira, fijate que a mí, me siempre me ha interesado lo que esa inversiones, lo que se, por ejemplo, podríamos abrir otros negocios, otro lugar con los mismos características. Y fijate que una de las cosas más bonitas que puede hacer es como brindar soluciones de unas cosas porque no solo estos productos, sino que puedes dar un algo más como por ejemplo, aquí ves la mayoría de las personas. Tiene que apagar, pagar así aseguranças biles y todo eso, pero no les queda tiempo durante el día porque están trabajando. En los fines de semana las oficinas están encerradas. Entonces ese tipo de cosas se hacen acá."

(Look, check it out, I've always been interested in what you invest, what, for example, we could open other business, another place with the same characteristics. And I mean one of the prettiest things we can do is we can offer solution to some things because, not only products, but we can give something more like, for example, here you see the majority of people. They have to pay, pay insurance, bills, and all that, but they don't have time during the day because they are working. On the weekends, the offices are closed. Then they can do that kind of thing here.)

Even as he hopes to expand to new businesses or services he can offer, his perspective reflects that of someone who wants to respond to community needs rather than make a lot of money. While he values work and hard work, his sense of culture and what is important to him

drives the ways that he invests his time and money. For Martín, faith also informs how he lives his life. This faith leads him to put his spare energy into focusing on how he can better live his life as a human. When I asked him how he understood work-life balance, he responded with a religious allusion.

“Ese tipo, mira ese esa pregunta bien interesante. Porque en la vida hay tiempo para todo. Hay un tiempo en lo que tú luchas, luchas, creas algo porque, puede ser un negocio y trabajar trabajar. Sí, claro. Pero hay que meterle miles, cientos de horas. Algo pequeño. Las cositas que hay ahí. Poco a poco se van, se van haciendo. ¿Y sabes que si me gustaría? Mira, me gustaría tener tiempo de calidad. ¿Sabes que es tiempo de calidad? No tener que pensar en que vas a tener que trabajar para pagar la renta ,para pagar los biles, para pagar la comida, sino que vas a tener como te dio lo suficiente como para no poder para no preocuparte por esas cosas pequeñas y enfocarte en cosas grandes.”

(That type of, look that question is very interesting. Because in life, there is time for everything. There is time that you have to struggle, fight, and you make something because, it can be a business and you work and work. Yeah, of course. But you put in thousands, hundreds of hours. Little things. The small details. Slowly, they start to come together. You know what I would like? I'd like to have quality time. You know what quality time is? Not having to think about needing to work just to pay rent, pay bills, pay for food, but having enough so you don't have to worry about those small things and instead focusing on bigger things.)

Martín points out the value that there is in work, as hard work can create pathways to experience more restful ways of existing. However, he makes it clear that there is a point. Work, and growth in business, are for the purpose of expanding a person's ability to focus on the 'bigger things,' as he states. Rather than working oneself to the bone, Martín speaks to the desire to have more time for himself. Other participants echoed this feeling, that they hoped to work less in order to spend more time doing the things they enjoyed, as work could get in the way of living.

For Jessie, coming to the US meant a lot of work, high rent costs, and time away from family. Though she was still glad to have made it to the US, the conditions were not all she was

led to expect. She was able to find work cleaning houses and worked long hours. Her husband worked in landscaping and also worked long hours. Meanwhile, her daughter was getting acclimated to school life in the US.

“Aquí es una locura. O sea una locura, pagar tanta, tanta, extremadamente tanta renta aquí. Si se puede pagar porque así como se gana- ganas más. Pero si eres organizado, si es organizado, puedes incluso hasta ahorrar.”

(Here is craziness. I mean, craziness, paying so, so much, extremely so much rent here. Yes, you can pay it because you earn- you earn more. But if you are organized, if you are organized, you can even start to save.)

She emphasized the need for individual responsibility in saving money because though they made money to pay the rent, money above and beyond that was not guaranteed. Further, the cost of living in Alabama was much higher than she expected. While she moved to the US for better work opportunities, she did not move to the US to work more. In her time in the US, her family had added another member, a baby girl.

“Yo tenía tres trabajos. No me di ni cuenta en qué momento me fui metiendo, limpiaba la casa, cuidaba una abuelita y el fin de semana me iba al trabajar como cajera. O sea, era una locura ni llegaba casi la casa. No tenía tiempo, no veía mi hija, no veía mi esposo y él también en un momento, ellos también trabajaba mucho.”

(I had three jobs. I didn't realize in that moment I was putting in, cleaning houses, caring for a grandmother, and on the weekends I went to work as a cashier. I mean it was crazy and I was barely home. I didn't have time, I didn't see my daughter, I didn't see my husband and he, at the time, they worked a lot also.)

Jessie points to work as separating her from the very reason that she came to the US: to have more opportunities for her family. While she is hard at work, giving all she has to make ends meet, high costs make doing anything more than the minimum difficult. When she arrived in the US, she believed that her hard work would put her ahead. But at the time of our interview, she had cut back to two jobs in order to spend more time with her family, especially her youngest

daughter. Additionally, she was able to find more community supports, including a food bank to help fill their pantry. This theme emerged among many participants, that high cost of living and low-paying jobs made day-to-day survival difficult. In addition, few social safety nets were accessible due to identification requirements for local food banks. Many participants felt that, though they worked long and hard, as their jobs typically required, they would never get ahead.

Kevin, originally from Venezuela, was able to find a path to create stability in his and his family's life. As he was able to immigrate to the US with a visa, he found he was able to get work and a place to live with his family without the extra burden of having a precarious legal status. When he first came to the area, he found a job on a landscaping crew working in a city about an hour away, which took him away from his family. Now, he works in a restaurant he helped open alongside the owner of the landscaping company.

Kevin: En la ciudad. Trabajamos allí, trabajaba de construcción. Entonces, bueno, era como que yo madrugaba antes de las seis salidas de mi casa agarrábamos la autopista hasta la ciudad. Llegábamos al trabajo ahí. Cumplamos un horario de 10 horas de trabajo, salíamos y de vuelta a la casa siempre. Todo fue muy tranquilo, muy rutinario. Ese era básicamente mi día en la semana de trabajo que era de lunes, jueves ya.

Antonio: ¿Y cómo ha cambiado su vida trabajando acá en el restaurante?

Kevin: Pues ya ahora conozco un poco más la ciudad, ¿verdad? Antes era más limitado, solo iba casa a trabajo. Trabajo en casa, el fin de semana aprovechada de descansar.

(Kevin: In the city. We worked there, worked construction. Then, well, I got up early, before six, left from my house, we took the interstate to the city. We arrived to work there. We had a ten hour work day, we left, and always went home. It was all calm, very routine. That was basically my day during the work week from Monday to Thursday.

Antoino: *And how has your life changed working here in the restaurant?*

Kevin: I know the city a little more now. Before, I was more limited, I only went from home to work. Working at home, on the weekends I could take time to rest.)

From his perspective, Kevin's ability to work closer to home has given him more balance in his life, though he had no complaints about his life before. Like many participants, for Kevin, work was a part of how he grew up, working jobs from a young age to have spending money and money to buy a car. Yet, workdays were not so long in Venezuela that they took him from his family. In the US, he stated that higher salaries made this sacrifice feel worthwhile.

“Porque definitivamente, pues, yo siento que aquí es mucho mejor remunerado el trabajo. Y aunque nosotros nos conocemos como, como migrantes, por lo general, la mejor parte no en el sentido de que nuestros ingresos suelen ser más bajo que el promedio del ingreso de un americano. Pues más, sin embargo, incluso teniendo ese promedio de ingreso más bajo con lo general, vivimos mejor que nuestros países.”

(Because, definitely, I feel like work is better paid here. And even though we know that, as migrants, generally, we don't get the best part, that our salaries tend to be less than the average American. Even still, however, having this half income a little lower with everything, we live better than in our country.)

For participants in Kevin's position who can immigrate legally to the US, the labor system worked well enough to benefit them in ways his home country did not. This, coupled with his willingness to work, led him first to a job with long hours. After all, like many Latin@ immigrants, he came to the US to work. This experience led him to see his way of living here as being validated by working, this validation coming through good pay and lifestyle improvements from his home country. Still, after opening his restaurant, he was able to see ways that this focus on work in Latin@ communities undermined Latin@ people's ability to connect to their community.

“Entonces, muchas veces, pues solo nos enfocamos en trabajar y, por ejemplo, dejamos de un lado el aprender el idioma, que es muy importante. Y entiendo, pues, que vamos muchas personas americana cuando uno está dando un servicio o le están dando un servicio a uno a nosotros, pues se les puede hacer incómodo la parte de la comunicación se nos incómoda todos. Pues incluso a mí a veces me avergüenza un poco este. Entonces creo que uno es los problemas que siempre nosotros y dejamos un lado es eso a tratar de

aprender el idioma, ya que eso nos va a a integrar más verdad un poco con la sociedad ya de aquí.”

(Then, a lot of times, we only focus on work and for example, let learning the language fall to the side, which is very important. And I understand, we go- many americans when you're providing a service or they are providing a service the communication part makes us uncomfortable. Including me, I feel a bit of shame about this. Then I believe that its one of the problems we always have and we let learning the language fall to the side, the thing that is going to integrate us a little more into the culture here.)

As many participants shared, working in the US was necessary to keep themselves afloat, provide for their families, and achieve material success. As people came to the US to work, they began to see themselves only through the lens of work, rather than as potential community actors. As Kevin points out, this restricts them from accessing the community and culture of the place they moved to. This was a common experience among first-generation participants. While they applauded their children for learning English, they themselves struggled to learn the language and access the culture.

NO SOY DE AQUI, NI SOY DE ALLA: LIMINAL BELONGING IN CENTRAL ALBAMA

Across my interviews, participants expressed the tension they felt living in central Alabama. My research findings suggest that Latin@ residents of central Alabama strategically engage with their own culture and the culture of the US South to establish a sense of belonging. Throughout the research process, themes emerged of how people often feel that ‘liminally belong’ (Escobar 2021), or they feel that ‘no soy de aquí, ni soy de allá’ (*I'm not from here, neither am I from there*). As familismo, the value of family identity in shaping individual choices and experiences, is a core social structure in Latin@ culture (Patrón 2021b), participants

expressed the presence, or distance from family, as being key in their construction of belonging in central Alabama.

Because of shared cultural traditions, some participants spoke to how creating new cross-cultural relations in the Latin@ community helped them to feel belonging. Other participants spoke to how they engaged with the culture of the US South in order to feel and practice belonging. Overall, many participants spoke to family as the key to making a place home. I discuss these findings in light of ‘Liminal Belonging,’ the feeling of tension one feels when they feel that they belong to multiple places (Escobar 2021). To answer my research question of what strategies Latin@ people in central Alabama practice to cultivate feelings of belonging, I highlight two principal emergent themes. The first theme is that of familismo and how relation to family encourages or discourages feelings of belonging. The second theme is commensality. I will speak to how eating together creates space for people to connect not only to each other, but to the world around them.

FAMILISMO

Throughout this research, family and family connections were raised time and time again as key structures of support and identity. When I reflected to Umberto that family seemed to be important to him, Umberto stated, “No sabemos decir igual. O sea, la familia para mí siempre ha sido eso. Y eso también yo lo inculcado a mis hijos. Sea que, o sea, tengo esa costumbre pues desde desde allá de México que mi abuela lo impusó y he tratado tener esa misma reunimos con mi mamá con mis hermanas. Así debemos a tomar un café o un algo ya, pero que siempre sea esa parte” (*We don’t know how to say it otherwise. I mean, family for me always has been that. And that’s something I’ve instilled in my children. I mean, I’ve had this custom well, since back in*

Mexico that my grandmother passed on to me, and I have tried to have this same tradition of getting together with my mom and sisters. Even if we're just getting a coffee or something small, but we always keep that [importance of family]).

Familia en la Patria: Family and Connection to Place of Origin

Whether they expressed the value of family as explicitly as Umberto or not, all participants shared experiences and decisions they made regarding the importance of family. For many participants, where family was, that was where they belonged. Like Umberto, Elizabeth placed great importance on family. Elizabeth grew up in Cuba, where she learned her love for cooking “de mi abuela y de mi mama” (*From her grandma and her mom*), the love for cooking which led her to start up her own food business in central Alabama. She, like many participants, speaks of the closeness of family in her patria, stating, “pues sí la familia es muy unida, se visita mucho” (*Well, yeah, the family is very together, we visit often*). However, now Elizabeth lives in the US with her husband and three children and thinks differently about family and Cuba:

“No voy, te digo, voy a Cuba ya por la familia que tengo. Eso es todo. El día de que esa familia no esté más, creo que con el dolor de mi alma, no regresaría nunca más a Cuba, no por los cubanos, no por nada por el gobierno, por el gobierno que hay la situación que uno va y mira cada cada cada año que pasa y uno visita a Cuba, ve más destrucción y más insalubridad. Y pues eso es lo que no me gusta de regresar allá. Solo voy por ver a la familia”

(I don't go, I'll tell you, I go to Cuba only for the family that I have. That's it. The day that my family is no more, I believe with pain in my soul, I would never return to Cuba again, not for the Cubans, not for the government, because of the government we have the situation now that a person goes and looks every, every, every, year that passes and they visit Cuba and see more destruction, more unsanitary conditions. And that's what I don't like about going back. I only go to see family).

Elizabeth's account reflects a common experience among participants. People, often moving from places in which they have experienced or perceived insecurities and economic challenges, reflect on the closeness of family they had when they lived in their patria, but that it is not something that pulls them back. Rather, Elizabeth spoke of her gratitude to be in the US, for the US "de habernos dado la oportunidad de poder convertirnos en ciudadanos americano" (*having given us the opportunity to be able to become US citizens*). This is not a situation granted to all who come from Latin America, as the Cuban revolution as well as Cuban and US conflicts have led to multiple rounds of immigration to the US from the island.² In her context, Elizabeth's route to citizenship removed a potential barrier to feeling like she can belong to Alabama. Though some of her children live far from her, she feels like they have better economic opportunities than they would have had in Cuba. For Elizabeth, this has looked like stable jobs that supported her and her family as she was able to raise her children in Alabama.

Participants dealt with this tension of having family in their patria, depending on whether they had family here in Alabama. As expressed in the story of Elizabeth, people often immigrated to Alabama in hopes of better economic opportunities. Often, participants shared that they found central Alabama as a place to live as other family members had moved to the area and found work. Esteban moved to the area to work in his cousin's restaurant. When he moved, he left behind beach days, his university studies, and his immediate family. I asked if he had people here he could rely on, and he said, "sí, y tengo familia aquí también. Aquí tengo familia de otros

² Due to the fear of communism and the US financial interests in the Bautista government in Cuba before the Cuban revolution, the US welcomed Cubans who fled after the revolution (Bishin and Klofstad 2012). Further, the US supported attempts to overthrow the Cuban communist government as they hoped to reclaim access to resources on the island (Bishin and Klofstad 2012). Those who came to the US were offered refuge and paths to citizenship and were often of higher socioeconomic status (Pérez 1986). This has led Cuban Americans to often align themselves with right leaning political interests, a political affiliation which has created rifts between them and others in the Latin@ community (Bishin and Klofstad 2012; Pérez and Cobian 2024).

restaurantes que trabajan aquí” (*yes, and I have family here also. Here I have family in other restaurants that work around here.*) However, while he does have family here in the US, he experiences tension in identifying with where he lives.

“Pienso que para mí, para mí todavía muy mexicano, porque es razón porque todavía no agarro la costumbre aquí. O sea, porque el único es ir a mi trabajo y a mi casa, tal vez si me relacionara un poquito más a eventos americano o algo así” (*I think that for me, for me I am still very Mexican, because the reason is because I still haven't caught on to the customs here. I mean, because I only go to work and my house, maybe sometimes I go to an American event or something like that.*)

This identification tension relates to the lack of opportunity for Esteban to go out, partly because he works long hours and partly because of the culture difference between his friends and the spaces that exist to go out. In this way, Esteban was limited in his ability to participate in the culture of central Alabama as he might have been interested in. For participants like Esteban, a young man who moved to the US by himself, connection is made difficult because the main tie to the place is work. In spite of this challenge in making a connection, Esteban stated that,

“Que cuando vives tres años aquí ya como tu pueblo, tu casa, o sea, vas a un lado y lo quieres ya llegar a tu pueblo. Me, no sé, voy vacaciones una semana Florida y ya lo que quieres regresarme a mi casa, mi pueblo, porque ya conozco todo”

(*That when you live three years here, it's like it's your town, your home, I mean, you go another place and you want to already be back in your town. I, I don't know, I go on vacation a week in Florida and already I want to come home, to my town, because I know it all.*)

In spite of cultural differences, many participants shared this experience that being here over time led them to feel more like it was their place, even if they did not identify with the place. Still, Esteban did not feel tied to the area, or like it would be a place to build his life, but rather it was his place where he earned money right now. As there are economic opportunities right now in central Alabama, it is an attractive place to earn a living and participants shared that

its calm. ‘La tranquilidad’ (*The calmness*), or the perceived calm in the area, was often a welcome respite for participants, especially in light of the current political situation in the US. However, this calmness was not enough for Esteban to call this place home.

Antonio: “¿Y más que trabajo, tienes más razón para quedarte aquí?” (*Other than work, do you have more reasons to stay here?*)

Esteban: “Pues por ahorita no solamente mi trabajo, mi familia están allá.” (*Well, for now, no, only my job, my family is there*)

Having family in other parts of the world contributed to a liminal sense of belonging as a valued part of someone’s identity was not present with them in this community. For people who immigrate to the US for work, whether that is for long-term or short-term, this separation from family is a weighty experience (Basok and George 2021). However, there is little incentive on behalf of the US government to ease immigration policy in order to accommodate people being able to move with their families or even visit family frequently, as Latin@ people are primarily viewed for their ability to work (Ewing et al. 2015; Miranda 2022). This is the case of Esteban and many participants with families, who are undocumented, and so leaving the house becomes a danger.

Liminal Parenthood: Parenting and Connection to Place

Care for family was a core value for many Latin@ families who participated. While participants like Esteban can go out with relative security but do not do so for personal reasons, other families with mixed immigration status must make sacrifices regarding personal mobility to maintain family security. For Rosalia, central Alabama was the place she wanted to live “porque es tranquilo” (*because it is calm*). She lived in a trailer in a park of predominantly

younger people who worked and went to school, and she lived as a single mother with her three children. Though her sister lives nearby, both Rosalia and her sister work long hours, and so they sometimes trade childcare, but do not get to spend much time together. Still, this support is welcome, as Rosalia's youngest is two. Rosalia moved from rural Mexico 16 years ago and does not want to return.

“No hay dinero. Y más que nada, tus papás no saben cómo explicarte de ti para que veas lo, el mundo, de ir despacio, de divertirse, de jugar, de decirte que no tengas tu hijo, porque eso es una responsabilidad grande. Y no se puede, pero ellos no explicaron eso a nosotros. Para ellos es normal que tú te juntes 15 años ahorita hay niños que estaban fundado 13 años”

(There isn't money. And more than anything, your parents don't know how to explain to you, you can see the world, move slowly, have fun, play, you don't have to have a child, because that's a big responsibility. And you can't, but they don't explain that to us. For them, it's normal to get together with someone as 15, now there are children who start as early as 13.)

Growing up in rural Mexico, Rosalia witnessed and experienced gender violence and the oppressive way that men treat women. Even as family is an important value in Latin@ communities, cultural norms surrounding male/female partnerships can be steeped in domination, or machismo (Mayo 1997). At 18, Rosalia decided to move to the US in order to flee this situation and live in a place where her children would not have to experience this context. However, she found that these gender dynamics traveled with the Latin@ diaspora.

“Sí, yo he conocido parejas que viven peleando así el hombre manda en pelear golpes y así sí, y tú no le puedes decir porque no lo puedes cambiar ahí. Ya no puedes ni la mujer ni el hombre no puedes cambiar.”

(Yes, I have known couples that are always fighting, like the man goes to violence, hitting and so, yeah, and you can't speak to them because you can't change it. At that point, the woman nor the man can change the situation.)

This illustrates the darker side of family relations, which other participants voiced as well. Participants, especially single mothers, spoke to the absence, alcoholism, and abuse, which were often found in their male partners. For women participants, this could make living in the US especially difficult because often a man was the one who they said signed the leases, worked, and took care of things like bills. However, for Rosalia, at least living in the US, her children would not be steeped in these cultural values. While there are risks for Rosalia in having a job and being outside the house, she views these risks as worthwhile to offer her children a different future: “Y por eso yo les digo que estudien o vean qué van a trabajar para hacer un poco de dinero y de poder tener mejor vida. (*For this reason, I tell them to study or see that they go to work to make some money to be able to have a better life.*)

For Rosalia, her children are the only people she sees on a regular basis besides an American woman who helps her with the school system. This isolation weighs on the family. When I visited Rosalia for this interview, she thanked me for the visit, stating she did not get many chances to interact with others. She tries to cook with her children, reflected by the robust kitchen in the trailer. Rosalia also shared that her high school-age daughter struggles with symptoms of depression, something she finds difficult to support. Her son, also in high school plays football, a sport which she herself did not understand, but she supported him getting involved. Rosalia’s life reflected the lives of many participants who were single mothers moving from more rural parts of Latin America. As a parent, she was willing to make painful sacrifices in order to offer her children a chance at a ‘better life,’ though the strains of the sacrifices often made family life difficult. While she does not like the trailer that the family lives in and she wants to move to a place where she can have a garden and cook outside, she says her kids tell her

that they want to stay: “Y y no queremos ir allá. Ya queremos ir allá, queremos ir a la escuela de aquí” (*And we don't want to go there. We don't want to go there, we want to go to school here.*)

Ultimately, Rosalia's story reflects the extent to which parents in Latin@ communities will make sacrifices in order to provide for their children. While Rosalia stated that she liked the area because it was calm and that she wouldn't want to move anywhere else, her connection to the area is because of her children, who have found a connection through the local school system. In this way, Rosalia's connection here is liminal, and she does not have opportunity to engage with the community in a way that would lead to her to feel as though she belongs. Rosalia's legal status means that she is a potential target of immigration enforcement. Still, she goes to work and tries to show up for her children. When she speaks about the fear in the community, she shares that she is realistic about the situation, but that she cares most for the well-being of her children, especially her youngest son.

“Pues ahora, sí todo tenemos miedos ahora sí, porque yo no quiero ir a México o todavía no ya, tal vez que crezca un poquito porque él es el el niño chiquito. Para mí, él es más chiquito, no hay más. Los otros ya están como que más ya para entender y él no. Y él quiero que él crezca un poco.”

(Well, now, yes we're all afraid now, yes, because I don't want to go to Mexico or not yet, maybe when he grows up a little because he's a young kid. For me, he is the smallest, there's no other. The others already are like more, can understand and him no. And I want him to grow up a little.)

Putting Down Raíces: Familismo & Belonging

As family outside the US maintains identity connection and feelings of belonging to other places, establishing family here in central Alabama can lead to feelings that one belongs here. In the experiences of Rosalia and the other single mother participants, belonging may feel like a

stretch, something they hope their kids get a chance at but not necessarily something for themselves. However, for others in the Latin@ community growth of family is key in making the land of Alabama a place where they can see themselves. For example, Umberto, who moved to central Alabama 25 years ago, speaks to how he practices getting coffee and spending time with his family that now lives in the area with him. For Umberto, this is his community, a place he has spent time, made sacrifices, and now gets to watch his children grow up. This was a shared experience among participants, especially those who had been in the area a long time and who had a business in the area.

David is the owner of a local taqueria. Like Umberto, David has been in the community for a number of years, arriving in a sort of first wave of Latin@ immigration around the mid 2000s. Like many Latin@ immigrants, David came to the US with the idea of building a business, which he has achieved, alongside with his wife and children.

“Y bueno, fue en un principio cuando abrimos, fue bastante bueno. Fue también un poco difícil porque solamente eramos mi esposa, yo y mis dos hijos que estábamos trabajando. Y siempre cuando abrimos, pues fue difícil porque no contráramos abrimos con muy poco capital y tuvimos que trabajar muy duro para poder ahorrar un poco y y poder hacer este otro pedacito que le hicimos al restaurant.”

(And well, it was in the beginning when we opened, it went very well. It was also a little difficult because it was only my wife, my and my two children who were working. And always when we opened, it was difficult because we didn't hire, we opened with very little capital, and we had to work very hard to be able to save a little and to be able to do this other little section we added to the restaurant.)

For David, this business was every bit of a family business, an opportunity to establish themselves economically and do something that at least he and his wife had a passion for. Unlike others who fled Latin America to escape violence or gender discrimination, David came from a part of Mexico which “es bonita, es la gente es muy, muy alegre” (*is pretty, it's the people, it's very, very happy.*) To David, where he lived was safer than places in the US where there seem to

be firearms everywhere, and there is discrimination against Latin@s. However, the economy was struggling where he lived, and they did not receive much support. David left his mother and family to seek new opportunities. To make ends meet, between their full-time jobs, he and his wife sold food on weekends for extra cash before they had the restaurant.

“Eso es lo que ya hacía y lo que sus tamales sábado y domingo salíamos a vender los tamales con ellas. Y de esa manera es que podíamos ahorra dinero. Esa era la única manera.”

(That’s what we did and we went out Saturday and Sunday to sell tamales with [the kids]. And that’s how we saved money. That was the only way.)

For David and his family, like many participants, those first years of transition to life in central Alabama were difficult and full of moments of just making ends meet. But, as there was even less perceived opportunity back in Mexico, they worked until they were able to open the restaurant. With this business, David has been able to further expand the network of people he knows, hold a position in the community, and gain ownership. Meanwhile, the economic situation in Mexico has improved. Because of Mexico's current policy and leadership, David’s mother has been able to access more cash and achieve greater class mobility. Still, he is not interested in returning.

Antonio: ¿Si pudiera mudarse de aquí, lo haría? ¿Y a dónde?

David: En realidad no me mudaría, no me mudaría. Yo me quedaría aquí. Si ya si no tuviera otra elección, si no tuviera otra elección, porque me tuviera que mover a México. Yo creo que yo siempre he empezado en invertir en un negocio y poner un negocio en el lugar que a mí siempre me ha gustado porque lo visité. Fue un área que se llama merida. Yucatán, dónde–

Antonio: ¿El Yucatán?

David: Sí, me gustaría. No, no regresar a mi pueblo. No regresar pueblo.

(Antonio: If you could move from here, would you? And where?)

David: In reality, I wouldn't move, I wouldn't move. I would stay here. If I, if I had no other option, if I had no other option, because I had to move back to Mexico? I believe I always have started to invest in a business and put a business in the place I always want to visit. It was an area called Merida. Yucatan, where—

Antonio: The Yucatan?

David: Yes, I would like that. Not going back to my home town. Not going back to my town.)

As David voiced themes relating to his business and the meaning of starting business, starting business was almost always mentioned alongside family. Like other Latin@ parents who participated, David's sense of connection to central Alabama was most palpable through his connection to his children. Through his children and his business, David felt that this was his community as much as it would be another person's.

“Te voy a decir algo. Algo que mucha gente tal vez no lo va a creer. Pero yo siempre, yo me considero que estas tierra es parte mía. Alabama, este pueblo. Me siento de aquí. Me siento como que, eh, si yo voy a la Florida y cuando yo entro Alabama, yo siento felicidad. Pues digo, ya llegué a mi casa, ya llegué donde yo soy. Y este igual cosa, cualquier estado que yo vaya, yo considero ya Alabama, mi tierra la considero mi tierra. Y y no es algo que, como te diré que no por tal vez no por nacimiento, pero es algo que siento mi corazón entiende por el tiempo que yo llevo aquí y por las raíces que ya hemos dejado aquí, porque aquí tengo sobrinos nacidos de Alabama. Tengo nietos ya aquí de Alabama. Y pues mis hijas y mi hijo y yernos de aquí nacidos de Alabama mixto tanto afroamericanos, con mexicano y blanco con mexicano.”

“I'm going to tell you something. Something that many people won't believe. But I always, I consider that this land is mine also. Alabama, this town. I feel from here. I feel like if I go to Florida and when I get back to Alabama, I feel happy. Well, I say I arrived home, I arrived where I am. And the same thing, whichever state I go to, I consider myself from Alabama, my land, I consider my land. And its not something that like I will tell you not , maybe not by birth, but its something I feel in my heart, understand, for the time I have spent here and for the roots that we have left here, because here I have nephews born in Alabama. I have grandchildren here in Alabama. And well my daughters and my son and sons-in-law were born in Alabama mixing as well with African Americans, with Mexicans, and White with Mexican.)

In this way, David has incorporated a great deal of his identity into belonging here, because of his business and the time he has been here, but more so because they have roots here. Family members and grandchildren born in the US in mixed families, for David, show how Alabama is becoming part of his family's history, even though he was not born there. David's account reflects a deep sense of belonging by seeing his world reflected back to him where he lives (Allen et al. 2021). David's ability to make this place his own is reflected by other participants, yet these participants often shared a long tenure living in the area and the ability to start a business. As many of the participants are more recent arrivals to the area, they have not been able to lay down the raíces that David speaks of. Future research could follow these families to better understand the dynamics of how family establishment or not effects the ways in which Latin@ people are able to relate to a place.

COMMENSALITY

Commensality, or eating together, was a prominent theme that emerged in how Latin@ people in central Alabama participated in their local communities, connected with others, and formed positive experiences. This was not only a theme that emerged from participants' spoken words, but was also experienced by me as the researcher. Often, I spoke with people in food-related environments, whether that was a kitchen or a restaurant. When I met a participant at their home, they often offered a drink, such as water or coffee, and sometimes a snack. In one situation related to this research, I found myself in a kitchen surrounded by several Latina single mothers. Another participant had shared the word about this project I was doing and had set up for me to meet with what I thought would be a couple of women. However, when I arrived, people continued to arrive until there were 15 people in the kitchen. While data from that

conversation is not used due to difficulties obtaining consent (due in itself to distrust of signing paperwork), the situation nonetheless illustrates the theme of commensality in the Latin@ community in central Alabama. After we had chatted for about an hour, we rearranged the kitchen to make space for everyone to sit and eat the pozole, which had been cooking as we spoke. The formality of our previous conversation began to dissipate, and we all felt more comfortable simply speaking and sharing experiences.

En la Casa: Commensality and Belonging in the Home

Throughout this research project, participants noted that sharing a meal helped them connect with both their family and people from other cultures. Especially for older participants and first-generation participants, this emphasis on shared meals was something that came from the culture they grew up in. Leila, who was originally from Southern Mexico, moved to central Alabama fifteen years ago with her two daughters. Since then, she has been able to travel back to be with Mexico throughout the years.

Antonio: ¿Qué es su experiencia cuando vuelva a México?

Leila: Cuando voy a México, pues ver a mi familia junta y felices ya y convivimos, platicamos, comemos y disfrutar de tanto la familia como de los platillos. Porque la gastronomía en México es muy rica. Todos los lugarcitos tienen sus propias platillos y sus propias tradiciones.

Antonio: *What is your experience when you return to Mexico?*

Leila: *When I go to Mexico, I see my family together and happy and we get together, chat, eat, and enjoy the food, as much the family as the dishes. Because the gastronomy in Mexico is very rich. Every little place has their own dishes and their own traditions.*

Growing up in rural Mexico, Leila's mother operated a panadería (*bakery*), and the family often had few resources. Like other participants, she later immigrated to the US in hopes

of securing a better future for her daughters, in which they would not struggle with the same problems that Leila had encountered. While she expressed hopes of coming to the US, she stated that leaving “fue muy triste. Triste. Porque dejar a mi mamá mis hermanos fue, fue poquito triste” (*Was very sad. Sad. Because leaving my mom and my siblings was, it was a little sad*). For Leila, this commensality that she experienced on return trips to Mexico was something that she had grown up in the midst of.

“Pues nosotros ya más grandes, más mayorcitas ayudábamos. Casi toda la familia pasó por eso. Las mujeres. Pasamos por eso. Entonces yo cocinaba, desde muy chiquita cocinada. Y y con mi mamá también, sí, haciendo alguna sopa o alguna cocina guisando alguna carne.”

(Well those of us who were older, the older ones helped. Almost the whole family did this. The women. We did that Then I cooked, from very young I cooked. And, and with my mom also, yeah, making some soup or something stewing some meat.)

Like many participants, especially those who grew up in more rural contexts, Leila cooked alongside family members as part of daily life. For Leila, this practice, as well as doing it alongside her family, became part of what it meant to live in Mexico. As she moved to the US, food and sharing of food continued to be an important aspect of her identity. For most of her time living in the area, she has worked at a local restaurant, where she prides herself on the food they serve. Also, her daughters have learned to cook, including the daughter she lives with: “aquí [mi hija] está aprendiendo, ella cocina muy rico” (*My daughter here is learning; she cooks very well*). While Leila hopes to return to Mexico one day, central Alabama has been her home for the past fifteen years and a place to which she belongs. As sharing meals helps her to feel connected to her family in Mexico and retain that part of her identity, she also taught her daughters the practice of sharing meals, which has become an important family touchpoint.

Eloise, who also participated in this project, is Leila's daughter. Eloise grew up in central Alabama since she was 11. She went to a local high school and attended a local college and has lived in the same area her whole life here, though she moved a town over from where her mom and sister live. While she maintains the importance of her Mexican heritage, she states that growing up in the US gave her different values, such as independence.

“I mean, there's just like so much more opportunity here and actually my grandpa was the one, well last time I went to Mexico, he was kind of like, "You're too independent. You need to move back with your mom and like be with her and take care of her and she takes care of you.”

For Eloise, independence has meant her ability to work multiple jobs and live with friends, as well as have her own car and go on trips. Eloise has formed a strong connection with central Alabama and with the life that she is able to live here. While Eloise grew up speaking Spanish, she chose to do this interview in English as, during her time growing up in Alabama, English became the language she felt most comfortable with. She would consider moving to a more diverse place, as that is not something she feels is reflected to her, this is the place where her community is: “I love this place, I love the community, I love being like neighbors with my friends, I love that I work downtown in like two of the like the best like spots I would say. I know a lot of people here. It really does feel like mine.” Something that is reflected in Eloise's life is the importance of food in building that sense of community. Even while this community does not share her cultural identity, she has found shared interests around which to build relationships. When she spends time with this community, she stated, “I like going over to my friend's houses. I'm a big talkative person, so just talking. I like going out to eat food or grabbing a drink downtown.” In addition, Eloise often holds dinners at her house for her friends throughout the year. These gatherings serve to connect her with the people she cares about and allows her to cook, which she enjoys doing alongside her roommate. Just as food has served a

role in connecting Eloise with other young people in the area, food also helps to connect her with her mother and sister.

Antonio: Are there any traditions that are important to you? Like family traditions or personal traditions, what are those?

Eloise: I think one of the ones that I see the most that like is kinda unspoken, but we continue doing is that when I, growing up, every Sunday we would have dinner at my grandma's house and everybody would get together, like all the cousins, all the aunts and uncles. We would get, go to my grandma's and like have dinner there and like have family time together. And I think like, like being in the US, even if I don't like live with my family, like I try to every Sunday like be with them and spend time with them. I think that's a very important tradition.

As her mother, Leila, had grown up and grown to have her own appreciation and love for sharing a meal, Eloise also grew a love for sharing meals with family in Mexico. Eloise, unlike her mother, has no plans to move back to Mexico, as central Alabama has become her home. In central Alabama, she has her friends, her interests, her independence. Still, commensality functions as a point of continuity from her life before immigration and provides a bedrock tradition that gives meaning to her life. This connection relates to how food, and sharing food, continues in memory across space (Abarca and Colby 2016; Giménez 2009). As Leila has come to experience central Alabama as a place she belongs, she has still held to her Mexican identity. Eloise, on the other hand, embodies both her Hispanic heritage as well as the reality that she grew up surrounded by White interests, which she made her own. She stated that now she spends most of her time around White friends. Food, and food with family, connect her back to her Hispanic roots. When asked about a recipe she liked to cook, she stated,

“I would actually really love to learn how to make mole. My mom makes it so good and she puts like a bunch of different like things into it and apparently like every region of Mexico like does it differently. So I would love to learn how to do it with like the way my mom does it. And not just because I really love the taste, but I would love for that to be like a thing that like maybe my kids learn to like make one day or like grow up eating it and it's like, oh yeah, my mom's, like you know?”

As Eloise continues to experience life in central Alabama, as well as with a child one day, sharing a food that she first learned to love from her mother acts as a memory bridge to connect across generations, from Mexico to central Alabama.

La Comida Latina: Commensality and Latinidad

As food sharing acts as a bridge between generations as people practice belonging and relationship to place in their own families, food sharing can also act as a bridge between people in the Latin@ community to create new supportive relationships. The food traditions themselves contribute to how food can be a salient point of interaction, as they are rich and varied, but share common characteristics. When asked to contribute to the recipe book part of this project, people shared a variety of recipes, from arroz chaufa from Peru to asado de cerdo Cubano to tostadas from Guatemala. As food in Latin America comes from practices synthesized from all over the world (Pastor 2004), being Latin@, to participants, did not mean that they shared the same food traditions.

Karly and Elias were originally from Guatemala, where they grew up and met through a local church. While they converted to Christianity and do not practice all the traditions of their heritage, both are of indigenous origin and still value that identity in their lives, especially through food and language. An important food typical of Guatemala that they enjoy making is tamal, traditionally an indigenous food practice that has evolved with new ingredients brought in by colonialism and trade. A traditional Guatemalan tamal is set apart from the traditional Mexican tamal because it is steamed in a plantain leaf, rather than a corn husk.

Finding the ingredients in central Alabama for the Guatemalan tamal is simple, as Elias states: “Todo el ingrediente de tamales se encuentra en la tienda mexicana.” (*You find all the ingredients for tamales at the Mexican shops.*) Due to the large Latin@ diasporic community of central Alabama, Latin@ serving grocery stores have become common in the landscape. Often, as I was out driving to conduct this research, I would see new stores opening in what used to be laundromats, karate dojos, or strip shopping malls. During my time in the field, the majority of the stores that I saw were Mexican identifying, though a handful of Guatemalan stores were also present in the area. Nonetheless, each store carried a mostly similar product line, which could appeal to a diverse customer base, as participants who were store owners shared that store management was most important in establishing a successful business. Oftentimes, behind the counter, stores would have rearview mirror flags from Latin American countries, usually Mexico and Central American countries. However, while they could find the ingredients at the local ‘tienda Mexicana,’ Karly shared this did not mean that all tamales were made the same.

“Como cada país tiene su referencia de hacerlo. Como los de Honduras. A veces le meten manteca, le meten más mole y sale más, más suave. Cada país, en México le meten la raja o chile morrón. Eso sale diferente. Cada país tiene su su diferente manera de, como son lo mi mismo tamal, pero tiene diferente preparación ya.”

(Each country has their own way of making it. Honduras for example. Sometimes they add more lard, they add more mole and its more, more soft. Every country, in Mexico, they add strips of chili or bell pepper. They taste different. Every country has their own way, they're the same tamal, of preparing tamales.)

Tamales are an example of a regional dish that, having different preparation practices, still has commonalities that make it recognizable across different cultures in Latin America. While some ingredients may not be available in mainstream American grocery stores, people in the Latin@ community turn towards tiendas to find the foods that continue to root them in their identity (Fish et al. 2015). The presence of these stores for and by the Latin@ community

reflects the physical presence of the community and acts to give the Latin@ community a point of connection with their culture through food.

Sofia was a grass roots organizer in the area. Originally from rural Mexico, Sofia lived a few different places in the US before arriving to central Alabama. Working in a factory without a sure legal status, Sofia takes risks to go to work each day, yet she does so as she raises her three children as a single mother. Sofia knows she is not in a very different position from those she hopes to serve, but she does not want her experience of arrival in the area to be that of others.

“Yo pienso que la comunidad- para mí la palabra comunidad tiene muchos significados, como que- por ejemplo hay personas como yo cuando muy llegamos- cuando muy llegamos por primera vez en algún lugar hay veces uno pasa por muchas muchas- muchas cosas difíciles como escasez de- de Vivienda, escasez de trabajo, escasez de comida. En muchas maneras uno pasa por mucho escasez.”

(I think that community- for me the word community has many meanings, like when- for example there are people like me, newly arrived- when we just arrive for the first time somewhere there are times you pass through many- many difficult things like housing shortage, work shortage, shortages of food. In many ways you live through scarcity.)

Sofia’s own experiences with food scarcity and resource scarcity were shaped by her house burning down. When her house burned down, she was left with nothing, not expecting to find the help she would need to get a new house or start a new life. Yet help poured in from community members. With that help, she was able to get a new place to live and start a new life. That help led her to recognize the support other community members need.

“Una de las razones por la cual me querían [la ciudad] es porque yo sé que hay muchas familias que dependen de mí. También me siento como la obligación o necesidad de que no lo puedo abandonar. Sí, no los puedo dejar porque yo sé que ellos están como en el en una etapa donde yo estuve cuando llegué la primera vez.”

(One of the reasons why [the city] loves me is because I know there are many families that depend on me. Also I feel the obligation or need that I can’t abandon them. Yeah, I can’t leave them because I know they are one step away from where I was when I first arrived.)

Though Sofia shared that she would like to move back to Mexico, central Alabama is where she has raised her children and where she has cultivated a community to care for. This community grounds her in central Alabama as she is able to participate meaningfully in her local community as well as form connections, not only with the Latin@ community, but also with those who have the resources to provide more. Through her connections, she is able to leverage resources for her community, like school resources and information for college, as well as access to food banks. And she does not only organize for others in the Mexican community, but the Latin@ community more generally, use gatherings around food to build bridges.

Antonio: ¿Sintiendo todas estas presiones y, como usted dijo el racismo que existe aquí, como todavía practica como su identidad mexicana?

Sofia: Yo, como me identifico mexicana, es como que más que nada ayudando a la gente que son de no solo mexicanos. En esta área no ayudo como que México no pues que yo soy mexicana y no nada más a los mexicanos no. Yo siempre identifico como con la comida de que hay veces yo hago una comida y no pues que yo le invito. Y porque la comida de México y la comida de Guatemala de otros países son muy diferentes, los ingredientes. Entonces ellos conocen cuando por ejemplo hacemos un arroz, el arroz rojo ese es mexicano y no pues tú eres mexicana y ellos siempre notificamos por la comida ya sea el sabor porque es diferente y más que nada, por lo picoso que está la comida.

Antonio: ¿Ha visto usted la comida como un puente para conectar las personas de países diferentes?

Sofia: Por ejemplo, muchas veces cuando hacemos un cumpleaños, un convivio yo me gusta invitar como invitar a la gente que son de otros países y ofrecer la comida que yo hago y ellos, hay veces dicen, 'pues tu comida está muy rica y entonces es donde tratamos de conectar con otros lugares como intercambiando el sabor de la comida.

(Antonio: Feeling all these pressures and, like you said racism exists here, how do you still practice your Mexican identity?)

Sofia: I, like I identify as Mexican, its as if more than anything helping the people that are not only Mexican. In this area, I don't only help Mexicans even though I am Mexican and nothing more to the Mexicans. I always identify how with food there are times I make food and I invite people. And because Mexican food and Guatemalan food and food from other countries is very different, like the ingredients. Then they know when, for example, we make rice, red rice that's Mexican and well you are Mexican and they notice through

the food the flavor because its different and more than anything because this food is spicy.

Antonio: Have you seen food as a bridge to connect people from different countries?

Sofia: For example, many times when We have a birthday, a gathering, I like to invite people from other countries and offer the food that I make and they, there are times they say, “well, your food is very flavorful,” and then that’s where we try to connect with other places and trade flavors of food.)

For Sofia, commensality acts to create a bridge between the different food cultures that exist among Latin@s. Not only do these gatherings serve to share food, but they further build group connections which can turn into support when an individual may needs help. Many participants, especially those who had arrived more recently, shared how difficult it was to find support and community. Using commensality, Sofia is able to foster a warmer community in the midst of what can feel like an unwelcoming community for Latin@s.

Crossing the Table: Eating with US Practices and with US People

Participants shared that they often did not participate, or know much about, US traditions. This lack of familiarity with US traditions, participants expressed, created barriers to their interacting with these traditions and the people of the US who practiced them. Silvana, who was a second-generation Mexican-American originally from Los Angeles, felt much more familiar with these holidays and traditions. While she worked for a number of years as an engineer, the job took her away from her family. When she moved to Alabama, she took a job as the Spanish liaison with a school system to make money as well as spend more time with her three children. She relates to the students she serves because she, like them, was raised by an immigrant parent, and she learned to live in the US alongside her mother.

“She came from Tijuana when she was 18, kind of alone. We had family. And so, you know, she as well is navigating the things that our families are navigating, you understand? So I'm like the students. And so, you know, we, I was with her, raised by her.”

Because of her shared family and cultural background, she is able to relate to the challenges of Latin@ students growing up and having to learn a culture because their parents are unfamiliar with the customs and traditions. For Silvana, this learning came through being a little too unsupervised as she grew up, due to her mother's long workdays, a time in which she got in some trouble, but still managed to go to a prestigious college. While the US was a new culture to her and her mom, Los Angeles provided a kind of soft entry, thanks to its large Latin@ population and cultural presence. Alabama, she shared, was a different landscape altogether: “So when we first moved out here, it was definitely culture shock. It was like from my, when I graduated my high school was 80, 90% Hispanic.” Still, she was able to find a connection to the South. As her family, due to her job specifically, often found themselves in White spaces, they were used to, and enjoyed cultural events like football and downtown events: “But then when we moved here, obviously, you know, the South, we love, like there's things that I love here.” Yet, this shock of moving to a space which, when she moved to the area, had a small Latin@ population, still created a certain disconnect between Silvana and Alabama: “But obviously, there were no Hispanics. Like in 2014 when we moved here, there were very few, at least people that I knew. And so I felt very out of place, like I had no family here.”

Working in the school system as the Latin@ community in central Alabama has led Silvana to become a key figure in the lives of many families who are trying to navigate enrollment and student success. Yet, Silvana takes her job as a liaison between the school and the community further, as she often acts as a liaison between the Latin@ community and the culture

and institutions of the US South. Her Whatsapp story is always full of news and updates relevant to the Latin@ community, from food banks that people without documentation can access to reports of immigration enforcement in the area. Drawing on her own experiences of growing up as the daughter of an immigrant, she sees her role in the community as bridging worlds that might otherwise stay distinct due to the long work days of Latin@ parents and the cultural differences. For her, traditions and commensality help to bridge these worlds.

“Thanksgiving, I always make a nice Thanksgiving dinner and I have ... I, a few, I started a few years ago where I invite, you know, Latinos and my best friends from ... And Thanksgiving is not like really celebrated in other countries. And so they've had to learn that as well. And I remember the first Thanksgiving ... And I do a big table and a turkey and a ham, like, it's beautiful, right? Like all the China plates come out and some of my friends go like, ‘parece que estamos en una televisión.’” (*it looks like we're on television*).

For Silvana, sharing food at Thanksgiving is a tangible way that she can help others in the Latin@ community begin to engage with a cultural practice in the US. In addition, for herself, this practice of hosting grounds her in her own mother's love of hosting shared meals. Silvana has a relatively unique place in the Latin@ community I studied, as she is well versed in both US and the nuances of Latin@ culture. While her experience is unique, the way that she uses commensality as a culturally resonant way of connecting Latin@ people to a US tradition points to how commensality can provide the basis for future positive interactions with other aspects of US culture. In the context of what Silvana does, opening the doors to her family's Thanksgiving opens the doors for the people she invites to begin to explore other aspects of US culture.

While learning about US culture amongst Latin@ peers was one way that participants interacted with US culture, many participants also shared that they worked with US peers or managers. Elias, as previously mentioned, moved to the US from Guatemala with his wife and

children. In addition to practicing their food traditions at home, Elias points to how food offers a casual point of connection in his workplace.

“Trabajaba hondureño, salvadoreño, mexicano. No, no hay problema. Cada que lleva su comida a veces hasta hace un buffet se junta y le da un poquito cada que se mezcla la comida y es muy bueno eso hecho durante el tiempo que yo llevo aquí estado, nunca he visto una diferencia de que oye, tú eres de tal país. Hasta incluso como cuando trabajé en la compañía yo vi hasta incluso los morenos hasta vivo americano que dice el que viene de Texas y vive aquí se junta con ellos nos juntó como otro hablamos platica. Claro. A veces bueno, los que hablamos bueno, yo hablo un poquito de inglés, no mucho poquito. Pero si cuando nos contamos ya nos entendemos.”

(Hondurans, Salvadorians, Mexicans all worked there. There isn't any problem. Everyone that brings there food sometimes even makes a shared buffet and gives a little of each of their food to make a mix of food and its very good that they were doing that during the time I've been here, I've never seen a difference of, like, you are from such and such country. Even like, when I worked at the company I saw that even Black people, even an American that said he moved from Texas and lives here, joined us and we all got together and hung out like anyone else. Sometimes, those who speak, well I speak a little English, not much. But when we talked we understood each other.)

In Elias's account, commensality acts as a common place not only for Latin@s to come together, but also American born workers. Sharing a meal becomes a time for people to see one another as equals, engage, and share parts of their culture through food. This speaks to how commensality provides opportunities for positive interactions with people who are more perceived as 'belonging' to central Alabama (Allen et al. 2021). These interactions help Elias to form a better sense of his US neighbors. He hasn't interacted with them all, “pero la mayoría de, con lo que tenemos, estado trabajando, son buena gente.” *(but the majority of, with the people we have, that are working with us, are good people.)*

Though positive interactions around commensality can help inform feelings of belonging, commensal interactions are not exclusively sites of creating connections. Sites, like restaurants, can be complicated sites. In the area I studied, while there were Latin@ restaurants that sought to

serve traditional dishes to a primarily Latin@ clientele, as in the case of David, Umberto, and Kevin, the largest and busiest restaurants were primarily American-facing. Esteban worked at one of these restaurants, located in a prominent downtown area. The restaurant where he worked was staffed primarily by Latin@ workers, and he shared that some patrons took the opportunity of eating there to discriminate against the workers. Esteban shared, “Y eso, por ejemplo, trabajando en un restaurante mexicano, hay un racismo que ves.” (*And that, for example, working in a Mexican restaurant, there is a racism you see.*) Esteban goes on to share that this complicates how he is able to do his job of serving tables: “Cómo puede servir esas personas como la sonrisa al mismo tiempo que sabes que okey, esa persona, si no, no le estaba sirviendo, esa persona va a decir malas cosas.” (*How can you serve those people that smile at the same time you know, okay, that person, if you aren't serving them, that person is going to say rude things.*)

Experiences like this were common among those participants who worked in service industry jobs. As commensality is the sharing of food alongside others (Jönsson et al. 2021), the staff delivering the meal experience also participate in cultivating this experience. The example is worth noting because of the power dynamics involved in the interactions. Esteban expressed that he occasionally encountered customers who discriminated against himself or the restaurant staff, something which complicated his job, even as he was supposed to be serving his patrons with a smile. While the sit-down between Latin@ participants and Americans provided grounds for equal discussion, when Latin@s served Americans, the exclusion of the Latin@ person from the table created power differentials. Further research should investigate how power dynamics and positions within a meal inform the interactions that give shape to people's feelings towards others.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on 24 semi-structured and 40 hours of participant witnessing in central Alabama, I analyze how Latin@s experience Latinidad and belonging in central Alabama. While literature exists on Latin@s, immigration, acculturation, and many other topics related to Latinidad in the US, I wanted to investigate how this experience is lived in central Alabama. Studies about the Latin@ community in Alabama exist, but, as they are mostly related to health or labor, I wanted to conduct a study to know how people in the Latin@ community of central Alabama felt in their daily experiences. I looked at two research questions. First, “What strategies do Latin@ people in central Alabama use to navigate Latinidad?” And second, “What strategies are Latin@ people using to navigate belonging in central Alabama?” In discussing my findings for these research questions, I use the term *trellis* to describe how practices or identities support people’s lives and the results of those lived experiences. The trellis metaphor draws on the image of a structure, wooden or made of other materials, which supports a fruit vine as it grows and bears fruit. I find this metaphor useful for conceptualizing how practices and identities, though not static, are often covered over by a person’s daily life, and it is not until one looks under the vines that they see the vine’s supports.

In central Alabama, Latin@ people experienced Latinidad as a heterogeneous, dynamic identity. I chose to evaluate in this study how economic reasons for moving to the US shape how Latin@ people navigate Latinidad in central Alabama, specifically in regard to labor, as many Alabama industries benefit from Latin@ labor (Casanova and McDaniel 2005; McDaniel and Casanova 2003b) while the Latin@ community struggles against state enforced marginalization (Dovidio et al. 2010; Ewing et al. 2015). Like many aspects of Latinidad, Latin@ people’s

relation to work is an essentialized aspect of their identity (Pfeffer 1998). In this study, participants both aligned with this view of self as someone who should work hard and be successful and rejected this narrative as taking time away from other important aspects of their identity, like family time or time to focus on self. Edwin's perspective highlighted a feeling in the Latin@ community that, in spite of their precarious legal status, that the US needs people like himself. Many sectors in Alabama rely on Latin@ labor to fill labor gaps that exist with domestic workers (Brodbeck et al. 2018; Casanova and McDaniel 2005; Walter 2021b). In this way, he identifies a trend and uses his ability to work to validate his being a part of the community. While Edwin was able to achieve success by means of work, ability to work did not provide a reliable path to economic success in the US. For many families, the factories Edwin calls people to leave are the only place that participants were able to find stable employment. In this way, Edwin, and the messages he promoted on his media channels, reflected a hegemonic idea of Latinidad and work, one in which he assumed that all other should aspire to his vision of success (Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012). This is a perspective held within the Latin@ community as well as in the community of the US South, which sees Latin@ bodies as being validated by their ability to contribute to the southern economy (Salinas 2024; Winders 2005).

While this can provide success to some, many participants felt left behind by this way of working. Often, participants, such as Jessie, were forced to work many jobs to make ends meet due to the relatively high cost of living in the area. This left participants in this position without time for family or time to connect with the community they lived in. Essentialized perspectives on Latinidad state that this is what people want, as they came to the US to earn a living that could benefit not only themselves, but their families in their country of origin (Brodbeck et al. 2018). These narratives benefit employers, who assume that Latin@ workers want the long

shifts, but act to marginalize the Latin@ workers. This study shows that Latin@ peoples not only navigate Latinidad in relation to labor in central Alabama in ways that prioritize hard work and material success, but also that work culture can serve other purposes, such as being a point of connection as well as being oppressive and limiting to a person's relationality. Though Latin@ people share identity traits related to work ethic, each individual's circumstances, culture, and self inform how they navigate their identity in relation to their work ethic.

As I spoke with participants throughout my research, each participant had a different strategy of making central Alabama their own, even if it was a small act. For some people, like Sofia, the art museum was a refuge to explore ideas and beauty. For Litto, it was participating in a local motorcycle club. Belonging, feeling like a place reflects oneself and one's values, is a human need (Antonsich 2010; VanderWeele et al. 2025). As each individual found their ways to express themselves and relate to others and place, two principal structures trellised participants' feelings of belonging: familismo and commensality.

In this study, I conceptualized familismo as the value of family identity in shaping individual choices and experiences (Calzada et al. 2013). The experiences of participants speak to the value of family in shaping where one can belong. Literature on familismo demonstrates that family can be an empowering and challenging trellis in supporting an individual (Matos 2015; Patrón 2021a; Peña et al. 2011). Esteban struggled to connect with central Alabama because his family still lived in Mexico, and without his family, all he did was work. While he counted his time living in the area as a reason for feeling like the place was his, he and his friends did not connect well with the American culture in the area, creating feelings of liminal belonging (Basok and George 2021). Rosalia also struggled to connect due to her long work hours and legal status, making travel difficult. However, her immediate family was not distant,

but she lived as a single mother with her three children. It was for these children that she lived in the area in the first place, though it was stressful for her and she made many sacrifices.

Self-sacrifice for the perceived ability to create better opportunities for their children was a common theme among single-mother participants. Notions of gender roles in the Latin@ community, such as *marianismo*, guide women to this ideal, though the cost on their bodies and minds may be incredibly high (Rivera et al. 2024). Traditionally Catholic ideals guide the development of this gender role to be one of self-sacrifice, even though the recognized link to religion may no longer exist. Further, the absence of fathers in the community reflects the effects of *machismo* that enables men to be less involved in their children's lives (Mayo 1997). Through their absence, Latin@ men in the community add more pressure on Latin@ women to perform caretaker roles, limiting their ability to interact with the place in which they live in a manner that is reflective of their own interests and values. *Familismo* also acts as a trellis to support growing feelings of belonging. For David, he opened his business because of and alongside his family. A shared family focus on creating a life in central Alabama meant that there was support to open a restaurant without the costs of staffing, a restaurant that helped David to reflect his identity in the community through food. In addition to the business, the growing diversity of the family meant that his family identity was no longer tied to one place but reflected a diversity of places and races. Though racism in the Latin@ community can sometimes make inter-racial relationships challenging, especially between Latin@ and Black partners (Campos et al. 2016; Golash-Boza and Bonilla-Silva 2013; Moreira 2025), David claims this as a point of pride. For David, the growing diversity of his family signifies that he is increasingly more belonging to central Alabama.

Commensality is often defined as the sharing of food in the presence of others (Jönsson et al. 2021; Sobal and Nelson 2003). This study expands on existing literature to connect commensality to being a trellis for feelings of belonging. Narratives among community members connect rich food cultures with cultures of being together in Latin@ communities (Balvanera et al. 2025). In the case of Leila and Eloise, gathering to share a meal with family acted as a bridge to Mexico while also creating new connections to central Alabama. For Eloise, the importance for her to gather to share a family meal on Sundays because that is what they did growing up in Mexico points to the enduring appeal of the practice, even as she finds herself in increasingly White spaces. For participants, food acted as a memory bridge, spanning across countries and providing a tangible practice of home in a new place (Hadjiyanni and Helle 2008; Lopez 2020). Commensality not only connected family members in the home but also connected members of the Latin@ community to one another. Even as Latin@ food is diverse, participants shared that dishes across countries have similar traits, which makes them similar to one another. Sofia used this familiarity and difference to invite in neighbors from different cultures to share a meal. As her work is focused on outreach and community support, sharing meals serves the important connection of fomenting these relations and building community solidarity.

Commensality in this regard serves as a culturally appropriate way to connect people in the Latin@ community (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017; Saldivar-tanaka and Krasny 2004). Further, commensal opportunities serve as points to connect Latin@ and non-Latin@ communities. While US culture can feel difficult to access for Latin@ immigrants working long days and without much time to invest in crossing barriers into US spaces, Silvana demonstrates how inviting Latin@ friends into her experience of a US tradition can create a positive interaction, which can fuel future interest. Latin@ immigrants are forced to access their identity in the US

and must find ways to connect, transform, or lose touch with their identity (Golash-Boza 2006). By sharing in a commensal tradition of the US, as practiced by a Latina who made the practice her own, Latin@ people are shown an example of how they can live with both cultures. In addition, participants shared how workplace meal sharing can foster feelings of connection. As those in working-class manufacturing jobs and other labor-intensive jobs spend a good deal of time around their coworkers, sharing a meal can break down these employment relations and create space for human interaction (Kniffin et al. 2015). In this study, I demonstrate that food-sharing practices, commensality, can inform how people practice and experience belonging in central Alabama.

My research reveals the nuance that exists within the Latin@ community. Both place and identity are dynamic traits, interacting with a person's current context to shape how they experience this place, central Alabama. Latin@ people experience heterogeneous Latinidad. Cultural and national differences create unique sources of identity that share common aspects, which, especially when surrounded by what is American, shape Latin@ identity. In spite of state-sanctioned efforts at exclusion, Latin@ peoples find ways to engage with the cultures around them. This positive engagement despite the current political system working against them calls to mind the positivity of Black people when freed from being enslaved, who sought to build new societies that celebrated their experience.

Though they still existed in a context that saw their bodies firstly for their labor, Black people created townships, engaged in local politics, and advocated for greater education (Roberts 2018; Tisby 2019). In central Alabama, the participants I spoke with wanted to engage with the culture around themselves, if not for themselves, then for their children. Still, the barriers to entry are high as the current political system seeks to marginalize and disenfranchise Latin@

communities, similar to the violent racism which sought to keep Black people in the South from claiming their political power (Bateman 2023; Ewing et al. 2015; Inwood 2015). While there are parallels between the two histories, there are important differences in the contexts. For one, whiteness will soon no longer be the majority race in the United States, while the Latin@ population continues to grow and becomes more involved politically (Spencer 2023; Winders 2005). While this is complicated by the ability of whiteness to broaden itself and absorb new ethnicities into its definition as well as the decline in Latin@ identification across generations, more positive representations of Latinidad offer Latin@ people more ways to identify with their Latinidad in the US (Aparicio 2003; Golash-Boza 2006; McDermott and Ferguson 2022). Secondly, the rise of Latin@ culture and the popularity of Spanish language media has given Latin@ culture a greater voice in cultural conversations (Aparicio 2003). Future research should continue to investigate the lived, daily experiences of people in the Latin@ community, with a particular focus on women, especially single mothers, whose voices and perspectives are often overlooked. This includes research into family structure in Latin@ households and the different family dynamics which exist. In addition, research should include the ways in which Latin@ people are working to preserve and practice indigenous knowledge in the South US.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this study, I set out to investigate Latin@ community member strategies for navigating Latinidad and belonging in central Alabama. I utilized a qualitative research approach, conducting semi-structured interviews and participant witnessing. As part of this project, I also worked to collect recipes for a recetario I plan to give to participants as a gesture of gratitude for their participation. I employed qualitative methods to investigate the human, lived experience of Latin@ community members in central Alabama. These methods allowed me to sit in conversation, be responsive to the settings in which I visited, and listen and engage with participant stories during interviews.

Regarding my research questions, I identified two main findings. The first was that Latin@ people draw on different values related to their Latin@ identity to navigate Latinidad and labor in central Alabama. Dominant narratives exist both within and outside the community that frame Latin@ people as hard workers willing to work long hours and in precarious conditions (Hallett 2012; Martínez Guillem and Briziarelli 2012; Salinas 2024). Participants engaged with this narrative in ways that helped them to achieve material success. However, participants who did not engage with this strategy drew on values related to Latinidad, such as community, family, and intercultural connection to explain how their work helps them create meaning in their lives. In my second finding, I describe the strategies Latin@ residents of central Alabama use to navigate feelings of belonging. I use the metaphor of the trellis to show how the culturally relevant values of familismo and commensality provide social and cultural support for

connecting with central Alabama, creating opportunities to do so, providing motivation to connect, and generating opportunities for positive experiences.

In my findings, I point to how family, where one's family resides, the legal status of family members, and the growth of family in the US, influences how people pursue feelings of belonging in central Alabama. My findings speak especially to the tension that Latin@ parents without secure legal status and citizen children live in, as they may personally sacrifice their own ability to cultivate connection in favor of feeling as if they have given their children the opportunity to do so. Commensality was another strategy participants used to cultivate feelings of belonging in central Alabama. Commensality both trellised intergenerational cultural memory by shared food practice and gathering, as well as provided a point of curiosity which enabled people of different races and nationalities to explore one another's traditions and food practices.

In these ways, my findings suggest how familismo supports connection with central Alabama and provides motivation to do so, as commensality creates more opportunities to connect and generates opportunities to have positive experiences with others in the area. This research is a jumping-off point for understanding more about Alabama by providing insight into the Latin@ population of central Alabama by extending existing knowledge of Latinidad and 'El Nuevo South' into Alabama by investigating strategies Latin@ people use to navigate their own identity and belonging in Alabama. Additionally, my research further highlights the presence of indigenous knowledge in the Latin@ diaspora in the US South.

Future research should consider more interactive approaches to engaging with the Latin@ community, due to the general business in community life, and should continue to explore Latinidad in Alabama, especially how people experience Latinidad as they increase in knowledge and relationality to the various cultures that exist in Alabama. Further research should

also examine the indigenous sources of knowledge within the Latin@ diaspora and the ways people practice or fuse indigenous knowledge in Alabama. Lastly, additional research should investigate more women's, and especially single mother's, experiences of living in central Alabama and the ways in which they find support for themselves and their families.

My plans for this thesis research include distributing this information to participants in the community in which the research took place, as well as gathering Latin@ community members to foster more dialogue on topics relevant to the community. While this interview study generated rich data, the formal semi-structured interview format created barriers to whom I could access due to time constraints and people's unfamiliarity with the format and process of qualitative data generation. Future efforts to generate data on this community could include more canvassing-based approaches as well as in-person surveys on focused issues. In addition, throughout this research process, I identified several community activists already working in the area. Further research in the area would more heavily involve these community members in informing the research design process, alongside data sharing and purpose.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

¿Como se llama usted?

What is your name?

¿Vive aquí solx o vive con otras personas?

Do you live here alone or with other people?

¿Son familiares?

Do you live with family members?

¿Son amigxs?

Are they friends?

¿Cuánto tiempo ha estado aquí, en este lugar?

How long have you been here, in this place?

Si es de aquí...

Describame un día rutinario para usted.

What does a regular day look like?

¿En qué trabaja usted?

What do you work in?

¿Qué hace usted para divertirse?

What do you do for fun?

¿Dónde pasa usted su tiempo?

Where do you spend your time?

Si no es de aquí...

¿De dónde vino usted antes de llegar aquí?

Where did you come from before here?

Describame un día rutinario para usted allá.

What did a regular day look like?

¿Qué comía usted allá?

What did you eat there?

¿Quién hacía la comida?

Who made the food?

¿Qué le gusta hacer para divertirse?

What did you do for fun?

¿Cuánto tiempo vivió allá?

How long did you live there?

¿Cómo eligió este lugar para vivir?

How did you choose here to live?

¿En qué trabaja usted?

What do you work in?

¿Cuánto tiempo ha trabajado ahí?

How long have you worked there?

¿De dónde se considera usted?

Where do you consider yourself from?

¿Por qué se considera de allí?

Why do you consider yourself from there?

¿Como hablan las personas de allá de su hogar y de dónde son?

How do people talk about home and where they are from?

¿Hay diferencias entre generaciones?

Are there differences between different generations?

Okay, considere que un amigx o un familiar está pensando mudarse aquí. ¿Qué consejo les daría usted a ellxs sobre este lugar?

Okay, consider a friend or family member is thinking about moving here. What advice would you give them about here?

¿Piensa usted que es fácil encontrar comida Latina aquí?

Do you believe it is easy to find Latino food here?

¿De qué dificultades les avisaría usted a ellxs?

What challenges would you let them know about?

¿Qué lugares les recomendaría usted visitar?

Where would you tell them to visit?

¿Si pudiera mudarse de aquí, lo haría? ¿A dónde?

If you could move from here, would you? To where?

Si no...

¿Qué razones tiene usted para quedarse aquí?

What reasons do you have to stay here?

¿Siente una conexión con este lugar?

Do you feel connected to here?

¿Qué le hace sentir una conexión con este lugar?

What makes you feel connected here?

¿Cuál es su actividad favorita que usted hace con su gente?

What is your favorite activity to do with your people?

Si sí...

¿Qué razones tienes para salir de aquí?

What are your reasons to move away?

¿Qué tendría usted allá que no tiene aquí?

What would you have there that you don't have here?

¿Siente usted que tiene personas aquí con quién puede contar?

Do you feel like you have people here who you can rely on?

¿Si necesitara ayuda para cocinar porque no pudiera hacerlo, a quién llamaría?

If you needed help cooking food because you couldn't, who would you call?

¿Otros le llaman a usted para pedir ayuda si la necesitan?

Do others call you when they need help?

¿Cuántas veces cada semana se ve usted con ellos?

How many times a week do you see these people?

¿Durante el tiempo que ha pasado aquí, cómo ha cambiado cómo vive?

Living here, what has changed about how you live?

¿Está feliz con estos cambios?

Are you happy about these changes?

¿Qué le preocupa a usted sobre estos cambios?

What worries you about these changes?

¿Es importante practicar las tradiciones de su familia?

Is it important to practice family traditions?

¿Hay alguna tradición con la que creció usted que ya no practican sus hijos?

¿Cómo le hace sentir?

Is there a tradition that you grew up with that your children no longer practice?

How does that make you feel?

¿Qué es algo que ya no hace que desea hacer de nuevo?

What is something you no longer do that you wish you could do again?

¿Cómo espera usted pasar los días en los años siguientes?

How do you hope to pass a day in the coming years?

Describámelo.

Describe it to me.

APPENDIX B

IRB: #00000642

¿ERES LATINO Y VIVES EN ALABAMA CENTRAL?

Are you Latino and live in Central Alabama?

Soy estudiante, estudiando mi maestría y estoy haciendo un proyecto de investigación escuchando las oportunidades y desafíos que enfrenta a la comunidad Latina en Alabama central.

I am a graduate student doing research listening to the opportunities and challenges that face the Latino community in central Alabama.

Si te interesa participar, completará una entrevista que dura una hora en una ubicación conveniente.

If interested in participating, you will take part in a one hour interview in a location most convenient for you.

¡Comparte su historia! Share your story!

Requisitos para participar:
Requirements to participate:

Ser mayor de 18 años	Must be older than 18
Identificarse como Latino/a/x o Hispano/a	Identify as Latino/a/x or Hispanic
Vivir en Alabama Central (No importa cuánto tiempo)	Live in central Alabama (Does not matter how long)

Si le interesa, póngase en contacto conmigo

If interested, Contact me

Antonio Martinez
(678) 427 -1009
gam0034@auburn.edu

APPENDIX C

Comida tradicional cubana

Arroz congri

Ingredientes

1 taza de Arroz Jazmín Mahatma®
5 onzas de frijoles negros secos
1 cebolla
2 dientes de ajo
3 tiras gruesas de tocino
2 hojas de laurel
Sal al gusto
1/2 cucharadita de comino
1/2 cucharadita de orégano mexicano
1 pimiento verde

Paso 1

En primer lugar, ponga los frijoles secos en remojo durante toda la noche. También puede utilizar judías pintas.

Paso 2

Al día siguiente, escurra el agua y enjuague las alubias. Después, colóquelas en una olla con agua fresca (unas 5 tazas) y caliente hasta llevar a ebullición. Cuando comience a hervir, añada las hojas de laurel y deje que cocinar sin tapar durante 1 hora. Añada agua si lo considera necesario.

Paso 3

Pique la cebolla y el ajo.

Paso 4

Cuando las alubias lleven cocinándose aproximadamente 45 minutos, empiece a freír el tocino y resérvelo. Deje a un lado la olla con el aceite.

Paso 5

A continuación, saltee las cebollas durante 1-2 minutos. Si utiliza pimiento verde, añádalo también en este momento. Pasados estos minutos, añada el ajo y el Arroz Jazmín Mahatma® y saltee todo junto durante 1 o 2 minutos más, asegurándose de que cada grano de arroz esté bien

cubierto por la grasa del tocino, para que se dore y se hinche ligeramente.

Paso 6

Los frijoles estarán listos cuando el agua adquiera un tono oscuro y espeso y las alubias se puedan aplastar fácilmente entre los dedos. Añada entonces al arroz los frijoles, sal (aproximadamente 1 cucharadita) y el agua de cocción de los frijoles (cantidad para cubrir el arroz unos dos centímetros). Si es necesario puede añadir más agua.

Nota: si usas comino y orégano mexicano, añádalos en este momento. Si utiliza frijoles negros enlatados, agregue todo el contenido de la lata al arroz, junto con una o dos tazas más de agua.

Paso 7

Cocine todo junto a fuego medio sin tapar hasta que el agua se evapore y solo quede una fina capa del líquido en la parte superior. Reduzca entonces el fuego a temperatura baja y tape para cocinar durante otros 20 minutos.

Paso 8

Pasado este tiempo, apague el fuego y añada el tocino mientras se esponja el arroz y se libera algo de vapor.

Paso 9

Sirva este arroz como acompañamiento de cualquier plato de carne cubano y tostones (plátanos fritos).

Arroz Chaufa

How to make it

So, for peruvian fried rice, it's just usually used with the rice from cold rice from the day before. We use that cold rice and then we do, you could do whatever toppings you want, like eggs, sausage, hot dog sausage. Green onion is big

You could do chicken or beef or shrimp, kind of like the Chinese fried rice now. You cook all that before and then you add the day old fried rice.

Then you add like sesame oil, soy sauce, I think that's it. I think there's another thing. And you obviously mix it all until it gets like a little brownish and stuff and how you like it and you just taste it as you go to see if anything's missing like to the toppings if it needs more salt or anything. I definitely like eating a lot of green onion in my fried rice. I feel like a lot of people make it different, but I just know of doing it that way and it's so easy and fast. So, and you can do it with whatever, you know, beef, chicken or shrimp or whatever.