

Finding “Home” in/through Latinidad Ethnography: Experiencing Community in the Field with “My People”

Wilfredo Alvarez

Scene 1: Bronx, NY, my apartment

Me: “Que yo le digo entonces si me preguntan algo?” (“What do I tell them if they ask me something?”)

Uncle Ramiro¹: “Si te preguntan algo tu le dices (If they ask you something you tell them), “I’m sorry but I don’t speak English.”

Scene 2: Bronx, NY, high school hallway

Me: “O si tu sabes que eso es lo que tu tienes que hacer. . .” (“Oh yeah, you know that’s what you have to do . . .”)

Raul (classmate): “No, yo se; eso fue lo que el maestro dijo en la clase. . .” (“No, I know—that’s what the teacher said in class . . .”)

Random student: “Stop talking that Spanish shit!”

Scene 3: Bronx, NY, high school teacher’s office

Me: “You think I should apply for college?”

Teacher: “Yes! I definitely do! Your English is very, very good!”

Arriving

The preceding scenes illustrate some of my early experiences as a newly arrived Dominican immigrant in New York City. These scenes depict moments of social rejection and victory immigrants can experience in the United States. As a Latin American immigrant, I have experienced social rejection because I speak a foreign language and come from an Afrocaribbean third-world country.² Though I have developed an awareness of why people respond to my particular identity intersections with hostility, I still ask myself, “why do some people continue to have such negative reaction to-

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¹ All names in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

² Meares et al., “Employee Mistreatment,” 5.

ward people like me?"³ A result of having such negative experiences is anger, a lack of perceived sense of belonging, and internal turmoil that has motivated low self-esteem. In social situations, I carefully rehearse my lines before I deliver them.⁴ I am also hyper-sensitive about how I present myself to others, especially to white people. There is an unending cloud of judgment hovering over me. It is psychologically exhausting.

I have learned that experiences like mine are common for many Latin American/Caribbean immigrants as they transition from their native to a foreign culture.⁵ Although we are a heterogeneous group, some Latina/o immigrants feel that shared experiences such as the ones described above create a sense of commonality. This false perception of a unified cultural identity, perpetuated by the US sociocultural imaginary that we are all one group, can (sub)consciously lead Latina/o immigrants to seek "home" among culturally different Latina/o immigrants. It is this (sub)conscious search for "home" that provides the background for the story I tell here. This is an ethnographic tale⁶ about my growth as a person and researcher as I explored the communication experiences of "my people" in the context of custodial work in a university setting.

In this essay, I share three vignettes from my fieldwork among Latina/o immigrant custodians. I highlight a type of ethnography where I, as a culturally marginalized researcher/narrator, indirectly sought a sense of belonging, a place to call "home," and a space for healing in my interactions with Latina/o immigrant custodians (researched/narrated). I refer to this type of ethnography as "Latinidad Ethnography."

Latinidad Ethnography happens when researchers and the researched use discursive practices in ethnographic inquiry to create a temporary sense of belonging, a "home" where marginalized persons heal from the harsh realities that we experience in mainstream European American society. In this context, narrator and narrated co-construct a mutually affirming unified cultural identity. The three interactions that I present in this essay illustrate how engaging in Latinidad Ethnography allowed me, the researcher, and the custodians, the researched, to transcend those roles and engage in social performances where research methods (mainly ethnographic interviews) led to fostering a sense of belonging, finding a "home," and healing.

Latinidad Ethnography draws from the concepts of social performance,⁷ Latinidad, and *mojado* ethnography. Victor Turner refers to social performances as social actors' mundane interactions (e.g., sharing a meal) and their (un)desired effects in social life.⁸ D. Soyini Madison further notes that social performances are examples

³ Allen, "'Diversity,'" 1995.

⁴ Smith et al., "Foreigner Talk Revisited," 4.

⁵ Bridgewater and Buzzanell, "Caribbean Immigrants Discourses," 235-237.

⁶ Clair, "Expressions of Ethnography," 2003.

⁷ As Goffman (1959) notes, "all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his [sic] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (22).

⁸ Turner, "From Ritual to Theatre," 32-33.

of (sub)cultures' particular symbolic practices.⁹ In/through our social performances of Latinidad, I found a temporary "home" with the custodians as our relationships unfolded.¹⁰ The sensation of "home" emerged from the discourses of affirmation and acknowledgement that the custodians and I crafted through our conversations about our work and lives. These conversations produced an unexpected desired effect—evoking temporary feelings of belonging and being "home." Such social performances are also at the heart of the idea of *Latinidad*: people of Latin American descent "coalesce" into a unified "place" in which we feel connected to each other across time, geography, and language.

"Latinidad" is broadly referred as the merging of the Latin American cultures in the context of U.S. society. I define Latinidad as a communicative process in which Latinas/os from different Latin American countries perform cultural identity in ways that enact our cultural richness and uniqueness, but also, simultaneously, construct discursive spaces in which we share, temporarily, one "common" identity. The product of such interactions is crafting a "Latinoness" where individuals simultaneously embrace another's culture and proudly enact their own.¹¹

My work is also informed by Enrique Murillo's idea of "Mojado Ethnography."¹² Mojado ethnography captures my struggles and feelings of alienation in predominantly white states, cities, and higher education institutions. I am always-already an outsider, *un extranjero* (a foreigner) seeking my homeland as I strive for acknowledgement and legitimacy, straddling the border that separates the "us" and "them." I am a marginalized intellectual who can operate both in the "hood or barrio" and the academy, but not a legitimate member of either. According to Murillo:

We [mojado ethnographers] reside and theorize from the locations of these border zones, and we are in many ways emblematic of postmodernity itself. The defamiliarization and alienation experienced through a mojado positionality (real, imagined, temporary, or otherwise) can serve as pedagogical resources to create alternative and diverse discourses and models... They may help build bridges not yet built or regenerate abandoned ones (2004, 165).

It is this alienated positionality that created the discursive spaces for the Latina/o custodians and I to relate to each other within the research context. The feelings of alienation that I experienced as a Latino immigrant led me to seek refuge in my interactions with the Latina/o custodians. Concurrently, I was able to generate an alternative methodological perspective (i.e., Latinidad Ethnography) that can illuminate ways that socially marginalized researchers study marginalized persons.

⁹ Madison, "Critical Ethnography," 171.

¹⁰ I use the metaphorical term "home" to evoke the physical location where one typically feels safe, relaxed, and at peace with our surrounding.

¹¹ Bernal, "Critical Race Theory," 112-115.

¹² "... Mojado symbolizes the distrust and dislike experienced in gringolandia, as la raza dada, "those damn Mexicans," extranjeros, which literally means "outsiders" (Murillo 2004, 166)

Working with "My People"

My research consisted of participant observation and ethnographic interviews at a large public university in the Southwestern United States. The organization is a predominantly white higher education institution where the majority of students, faculty, and staff were Caucasian or White. I interviewed 25 Latina/o immigrant custodial workers who were from Mexico, South, and Central America. My goal was to examine how Latina/o immigrant custodians negotiated their cultural standpoints with host society members in their everyday workplace interactions. I also wanted to develop new theoretical, practical, and methodological insights about relationships between culture and communication in microlevel organizational interactions.¹³

Of particular significance to this essay is the articulation of a *Latinidad* Ethnography. Engaging in *Latinidad* Ethnography happens when culturally marginalized researchers and the people they research use discursive practices to create a temporary sense of belonging, a location for respite as we encounter each other in the sociocultural interstice of U.S. society. *Latinidad* Ethnography is the discursive construction of "home" in the field, a place where marginalized peoples can heal from the often-hostile experiences in mainstream society. *Latinidad* Ethnography fosters a communicative context where individuals resist and cope with feelings of alienation as they coalesce into a "mojado" identity. This type of ethnographic inquiry¹⁴ is inherently a reflexive process in which the researcher is a central character in the story, and thus affects, and is affected by, other characters in it.

The following vignettes show how research participants and I did, and experienced, *Latinidad* Ethnography. They demonstrate the discursive process in which the research participants and I engaged during my field experience. They include conversations in which Latina/o custodians verbally reach out to me and I respond in-kind to construct a relational space where feelings of "belonging," "home," and "healing" emerge provisionally. Particularly, these vignettes demonstrate how Latina/o custodians and I, through our conversations about work/life, connected in ways that transcended traditional ethnographic researcher/researched roles.

Three Vignettes from the Field

In my field experience working with Latina/o immigrant custodians, three vignettes demonstrate the concept of *Latinidad* Ethnography. The first vignette shows custodians' interest in my lived experience, as they seemed to want to get to know me beyond the role of researcher. The second vignette shows a discourse that fostered in me a sense of "home" and "belonging." The last vignette illustrates a discourse of healing, as I perceived that my presence in the custodians' life produced a sense of hope in them and a sense of "redemption" in me. Overall, these vignettes contour my

¹³ Alvarez, "Communication Experiences."

¹⁴ Alexander, *Performing Black Masculinity*, xviii-xix.

ethnographic experience as a discursive community-building process, an alternative type of research process that I call *Latinidad Ethnography*.

Vignette One: Momentary Role Transcendence
Boulder, Colorado, sitting in a lounge near the university cafeteria

Me: Roberto, to what extent does the language barrier affect your social and cultural integration?

Roberto¹⁵: I believe that the barrier affects me a lot. In the context where one lives, the workplace, neighbors, shopping centers, everything around us that is routine involves the English language. Sometimes I've wanted to have dialogues with coworkers in English and I feel frustrated because I can't go beyond my limit. We say "hi" and the conversation ends there. I would like to integrate a little more; learn more about their culture, how they think and I can't do certain things. I go to a shopping center and I know basic things; to buy the groceries, what is basic—when they ask you for paper or plastic. But if I want to ask about something then I have to prepare how to say it in English. I have experienced that I go prepared and they don't understand me (laughter). It affects me because I aspire to get a different job and it becomes impossible. First of all, I can't even take a course to create a foundation to aspire to have a different kind of job.

Me: So it sounds like it's been very difficult?

Roberto: It has been extremely difficult. Did you experience something like this? How did you survive this, brother?

Me: I have experienced similar trials and tribulations, as well. Trust me, it's been quite a process. I had to endure some serious hardship when I arrived in this country. It took me a while to learn English so I can relate to you; it was very frustrating. And also, I did not want to go back to school. Had it not been for my father and my uncle pushing me to go back to school, I would not be here today. I would probably not know the language and I would have been working in some factory in New York like many of my family members.

Similar to how I sought guidance from my uncle in the introductory scene, Roberto seems to be seeking guidance from me. Roberto's discourse was aimed at finding some commonality of lived experience between the two of us that would help him cope with his existence. Roberto and I spent some time talking about our common struggles learning English as well as the difficult process of cultural transition and adaptation. Momentarily, I perceived that we suspended our roles of researcher and re-

¹⁵ Questions and answers are translated text (from Spanish to English) to maximize the use of space in this manuscript.

searched. Throughout our exchange, I noticed that Roberto and I felt safe, relaxed, at peace, not feeling the need to erect psychological barriers.

This exchange between Roberto and I illustrates that ethnography can be emancipatory and transcendental. Unbeknownst to both of us, Roberto and I moved beyond the "researcher" and "researched" roles and produced a place of respite; a location reminiscent of "home." We seemed to have found a "home" both in the sense of "returning" to our homelands and also the building where one is supposed to feel the safest and most at peace. This discursive construction of "home" creates an opportunity for ethnographers to learn about self and other, but also to emancipate the other, even if momentarily. This idea moves Latinidad Ethnography away from more traditional conceptualizations of ethnography (i.e., the ethnographer primarily engaged in "observing" the other) to a focus on acknowledging, and if necessary, aiding the other.

Vignette Two: Belonging and Finding "Home"

Boulder, Colorado, bathroom in the university football stadium

Me: To what extent do you think that your occupation as a custodian shapes how other people perceive and interact with you?

Isaura: The occupation affects you. It influences you because you're just a "custodian" who cleans. You're the worst of the employees. Yes, because you have to clean vomit, feces, I mean, it is honest work but dirty and I think people then think that we are dirty. And to be honest with you, some of us are wondering what your real intentions are [as a researcher], just because no one ever cared about us before. I mean, we appreciate that you seem to care. But please understand, some of us think that someone sent you to get information from us.

Me: No, no, no. I do care. Rest assured that I don't have any intentions to harm anyone and no one sent me. I just want to learn about you and the work that you do here. That's all.

Isaura: Thank you, it does make us feel like we matter to someone. Wilfredo, I've been here since 1981 and no one has really showed any interest in us, the custodians. And when they do they often tell you something very ugly.

Isaura's words are both heart breaking and uplifting. As I listened to her, I thought about my own experiences with harmful public reactions such as the opening example of the high school student who yelled at me "stop talking that Spanish shit!" My interaction with Isaura shows how some custodians perceived someone caring about their lived experiences. I thought about what it was like to be acknowledged by someone after having experienced intense social rejection. I also felt "cared for" as Isaura's and other custodians' life stories unfolded in front of my eyes. Their stories of public rejection and humiliation, as well as their soothing words of support, evoked feelings

akin to the comforting words of my parents would offer after I experienced a trying life episode. Further, Isaura's words illustrated her feelings of alienation, which are akin to my own. The oft-cited phrase "it was exactly what I needed at that moment" is fitting here. I heard an underlying message in the custodian's narratives: "Thank you for making us feel like we belong and for creating a temporary feeling of "home" for us." Had they verbalized it, my response would have been: "the feeling is mutual."

My exchange with Isaura also depicts how ethnography projects can be emancipatory for both researcher and researched—a key feature of Latinidad Ethnography. Through our dialogue, Isaura and I not only learned about each other's lived experiences, but we also attended to each other's "ailments" (Hyde, 2005) such as social rejection, feelings of alienation, host society members' verbal hostility, and unacknowledgement. In relation to the latter, communication scholar Michael Hyde argues that the communicative act of acknowledging others is a moral necessity in a human society; "remaining unacknowledged is a slight to one's being" (p. 26). The act of acknowledging others has the potential to heal social "ailments" for those doing and receiving the acknowledgment.

Vignette Three: Healing

Boulder, CO, break room in the residence halls

Me: So the [English] language barrier has been a major [socioeconomic] impediment for you?

Raul: But of course, what are we if we don't speak the language? Yes, we are Latinos, but we have to learn the language if we want Americans to take us seriously; otherwise, we are not going anywhere. I mean, I look at you and you make us [Latinas/os] proud. Continue doing what you are doing; that is cool, it is so good to see a Latino like you doing what you are doing.

Me: Thank you; I really appreciate that. It means a lot to me.

Raul's comment is significant because it illustrates a move away from adverse experiences between researchers and research participants. His statement represents a moment of hope for the both of us. It is as if we arrived at a place of redemption where he perceived that there was something better beyond that present moment and beyond his circumstances. I almost felt speechless because I was not expecting Raul's words, which were reminiscent of my high school English teacher when she expressed how proud of me she was and that I should apply to college.

I also perceived this encounter with Raul to represent a moment that was part of a process of healing for me. My interactions with the Latina/o custodians contributed positively to my well being at that time in my life. I had lived through a harmful period in my life and sharing those moments with the research participants helped me become "whole" again. I had felt "broken" due to having experienced a long period of harmful interactions with host society members. When I began doing ethnographic interviews, I felt that the process of healing had started. The way that the Latina/o

custodians received and treated me was in stark contrast to the negative experiences I had lived through leading up to the research project.

This last vignette exemplifies the potential outcomes that can be produced from Latinidad ethnographic experiences. One of the significant outcomes is the creation of a communication context where both researcher and researched feel mutually acknowledged. The dialogic process in which the Latina/o custodians and I engaged reminded us that our existence had value. Our sense of self-worth was replenished and reaffirmed through the research experience. For me and some of the custodians, it seemed that living in a hostile environment had eroded part of the fabric of our humanity and our encounter disrupted the erosion process. Engaging in such dialogic process in our ethnographic projects with marginalized persons is the process and product of Latinidad Ethnography.

Latinidad Ethnography: Creating Community in the Field

The three vignettes represent the possibilities of what can happen in/through ethnographic research when socioculturally marginalized people encounter each other in the research context.¹⁶ Through our interactions, the custodians and I created discursive spaces where we momentarily disrupted the typical, taken for granted order of social life. We created our own discursive practices and resisted the restrictive discursive structures that we inhabited. That is, through the use of our native language, we negotiated our cultural (dis)similarities as we temporarily defined our beings in new ways. This discursive production where new identities were forged in a context of belonging and healing was a salient outcome of Latinidad Ethnography.

My experience working with Latina/o immigrant custodians shows how custodians and I transcended the roles that we embodied in the research context. This alchemy was the result of having the courage to move beyond our restrictive, but significant, cultural (Latina/o immigrants) and social roles (custodian, graduate student/researcher). The custodians and I went beyond what was possible and created a discursive space that was imbued with meanings that nurtured our common humanity. In other words, we used ethnography as a medium for emancipation. This emancipating occurred primarily because we communicated to one another that I/we matter. And for me, mattering to the other makes me feel more whole, especially after attempts from others to break me. This feeling was evocative of what I felt when my high school teacher told me that she was "proud" of me.

I have worked hard to find people and places where my language and cultural identity would be affirmed. Along this journey, I have found people who have given me the love that I needed to transition and adapt to a different culture. Those people have been instrumental in helping me cope with the harsh realities of being a Latino immigrant in the United States. Those people have given me hope. I never imagined, however, that along this immigrant journey some of the healing that I needed would

¹⁶ Stanfield and Dennis, "Race and Ethnicity," 1993.

come from Latina/o immigrants custodians as we encountered each other in the context of ethnographic research.

Latinidad Ethnography contributes to the idea of affirming a particular orientation towards ethnographic research. This orientation is about how ethnographic research can be transformative for both the researcher and the researched. In this case, my experience shows the extent to which the researcher's identity matters. It mattered that, as immigrants, we found ourselves coping with social hostility, and it mattered that my previous life experiences with social condemnation encouraged me to ask questions about such experiences and to study the experiences of other Latina/o immigrants.

My field experience also suggest that ethnographic research can have outcomes beyond fostering deep understandings of people, cultures, events, or objects. Ethnography can be a "place" where people find each other to define themselves in new, innovative ways. These definitions can become transformative for those individuals and the communities where they exist. For instance, Latinidad Ethnography became more than a research study with "my people." This experience became more than researcher and researched and their interactions, much more than interviews, participant observation, and coding data. It became the collective creation of a people who found each other in the field, a creation that allowed researcher and participants to transcend restrictive social/institutional roles (i.e., custodian, graduate student/researcher, etc.) and reveal the resiliency of the human spirit to overcome by resisting ascribed dominant scripts that challenged our humanity.¹⁷

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¹⁷ At the time the research study concluded and I exited the research site, some of the custodians continued working in the same role of custodian. Others got promotions to custodial assistant supervisor. Some others were getting ready to retire and move back to their native countries.

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