

VIVENCIAS

WELCOME TO EL BARRIO: AN AFTERNOON IN THE COMPANY OF A LATINA FOLK HEALER

Anahí Viladrich

Hunter College of the City University of New York, NY

In the social sciences, the production of data is often underscored by interpersonal exchanges through which researchers and participants interact on the basis of negotiations, tensions and adjustments. The social science literature has now long valued the importance of researchers' self-reflexivity regarding the work they conduct, particularly by exposing their overstated expectations *vis-à-vis* their unexpected encounters in the field (e.g., Viladrich, 2005). Success on the researchers' part often entails an open-minded and humbling attitude as necessary for trust and reciprocity to be achieved.

Case studies, in particular, allow us to have a glimpse of people's lives whose subjective experiences may play an important role in shaping the fieldwork encounter. By deconstructing the inter-personal relationships that make them vulnerable, social scientists are not only able to dig into the fabric of their own subjectivity, but also into the social and cultural conditions under which the production of knowledge takes place (Behar, 1996). In this article, I introduce the reader to the micro-cosmos of research by providing a peek into the often harsh interpersonal dynamics that take place in the context of fieldwork. The following descriptive and reflexive notes are a testimony of my impressions in the field while conducting a research project on Latino healers' beliefs and practices in New York City (NYC), the urban fabric per excellence. These notes summarize an afternoon spent with Josefa (a pseudonym), a female community organizer and self-described spiritual healer, who works and lives in the East-Harlem Latino neighborhood, popularly known as *El Barrio*.



Demystifying "the field": entering a land of uncertainties

From the moment we got to *El Barrio* I felt surrounded and enthused by a lively social fabric that had been missing in my previous visits to many other NYC neighborhoods already devastated by gentrification, despair and oppressive poverty. Kids were playing on the street, elders were hanging out, and along the way Jasmine (my research partner) and I bumped into a beautiful community garden that suggestively invited us to join the troupe of *vecinos* (neighbors) grouped there while running from the summer's oppressive heat. In the corner of 104th and Lexington Street, De la Vega's paintings surprised us with his colorful and provocative messages many of which I had already seen on TV. I easily recognized him at the storefront where a film crew was hanging out as well. We also passed by the Julia de Burgos Center, another icon of grooving culture that testifies the reinvigorating force of *El Barrio*, which, in spite of the trendy force of modernized gentrification, still protects the local community through its thriving cultural activities.

Once we finally got to Josefa's place an inconspicuous door invited us upstairs. The building had probably been a warehouse in the past such as the ones that had made SOHO and the Meat Market icons of yuppie gentrification in the late 1980s, at the time when the postmodern renovation had taken over the former ruined downtown Manhattan neighborhoods. What would soon become clear for me was that their occupants were not yuppies, but struggling entrepreneurs eager to combine their creative endeavors with survival strategies, in a city that has lately become increasingly hostile to grassroots initiatives. The door was open and we entered a spacious loft that faced the street, in which modest tables were arranged as working boards and a few computers were placed by the sidewalls, next to what served as an open office. And here they were, our hosts: Josefa and her husband Pedro. It seemed to be the end of another busy day for Josefa, a big matron with long locks and a scarf decorating her head as a tiara, laying on a chair with her legs resting on front. Before even inviting us to sit down, Josefa and her husband commanded us in a joking tone to explore the big room that served as a classroom, karate studio and belly dancing stage, all activities that Josefa's team (a group of volunteers) taught to the children. The center mostly served Latino and African-American kids in the community by engaging them into a variety of activities, from after-school homework to intellectual and physical activities of varied sorts. Josefa's development center was, after all, a political and professional project in which she had become the CEO of her own educational adventure.

After a while, Pedro invited us to sit down while pointing out our uneasiness to take the initiative on the matter. I can still feel his inquisitory tone when he asked us if our project had received IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval, after which both Jasmine and I mentioned the consent forms that Josefa had signed during our first visit. This was an initial hint to let us know that our hosts

were not like the typical informants we had encountered so far. Versed in research protocols, a skill that they had developed on the basis of their previous experience as community leaders, they held an air of authoritative composure that was both intimidating and defying at times. If anything, Josefa and Pedro would probably fit the stereotype of the “professional informant” in the sense of being queenly aware of the interviewing game, as well as of the opportunity to use the research space as a vehicle to foster both their own personal and professional agendas.

Negotiating territories

From the very beginning not only did Josefa defy her role as a potential interviewee but she also challenged ours as suggesting: Who is the interviewer here, and who is the one being interviewed? Who is having the power of knowledge and who has the right to use it, how, and when? This became apparent when I timidly attempted to address the purpose of our presence there. I was careful enough to point out the importance of our research regarding Latinos’ rich array of healing skills and resources to heal others, through belief systems that are not often acknowledged by mainstream medicine. I also reminded Josefa the purpose of our visit basically aimed at finishing the formal interview that had been initiated a few days before. And indeed my own presence there was justified on Josefa’s request to meet me in person in order to continue with the interview process.

My expectations were not fulfilled, as Josefa soon stated that she would have preferred to wait for another day to complete the interview. Right after this, she began instructing us about the importance of giving back to the community, and about the need to create spaces that will benefit participants as well as researchers. I initially let her talk as much as she wanted, as she clearly had a point. Soon however, her speech turned into a demanding plea for our active participation in her center’s activities, particularly regarding an event she was co-organizing with other community leaders. Before I could even reply, she requested having us as formal participants in that event, for which she handed out forms that she wanted us to fill out and sign. Among other things, she expected our assistance to install a booth, distribute flyers and take care of questions and answers from attendees. Although I initially played along by trying to negotiate the “compromising effect” (showing willingness to do something in return for something else, the interview in this case), I quickly mentioned that I could not promise to do things that I was not sure I would be able to accomplish, even less to sign forms assuring my participation on an event while being in representation of Hunter College.

By then, the social air between us had begun to fill up with a bellicose miasma, as I clearly felt that something had to be said before the rules were completely turned upside down. We had come to see Josefa having in mind a

very specific research task, and we were about to miss the boat while feeling confused and guilty at the same time. In spite of the fact that we had been straightforward and honest about our intentions, Josefa's skilful rhetorical skills have been successful: we were about to get convinced that we were trying to take advantage of her, while almost forgetting the purpose of our research visit on which she had previously agreed upon. Suddenly, in a very spontaneous way I did what usually works best in these situations: I made a joke about the whole thing by abruptly stating what was really going on: "Wait a minute: we came here for you to sign forms, and we are now the ones who are ending up doing all the work... including having to sign up yours!"

Things became calmer after that as we all laughed about the paradoxical situation we had been getting into. We got Josefa's forms but we did not fill them up and she got away with not doing the interview, a pretty clear compromise on both parts. Nevertheless, she agreed to answering questions about her healing career as long we kept a relaxing, informal approach. Once I came to the realization that the taped interview would not take place on that day, I was able to relax as if we had signed a deal as "equals." At that point I began to enjoy the ride, knowing that we should try to avoid any conflicting situation that would eventually harm our already tense interpersonal exchange.

Gramercy Park in East Harlem

The garden has also become a crucial piece in her teaching kit, a resource that has allowed her to expand her trade to the children the center serves.
(Viladrich's fieldnotes, June 2004)

Right after this episode, we moved into learning about Josefa's current life, including her relationship with Pedro, her husband. Josefa's spontaneous revelations about some of her personal and intimate issues became the counter-side of the unspoken tensions that had impregnated the social space between us only one hour earlier. Josefa rapidly got into a romantic story telling about the ups and downs of her long-term relationship with Pedro, a narrative that resembled an urban fairy tale of impulsive misunderstandings and expected reconciliations. Josefa kept mentioning sweet details about their first dates together, including Pedro's occasional nervousness that had made him fall on the floor once, followed by a boat trip where Josefa had realized that "this was it," while dancing to a romantic tune. It was surprising for me to see how the confession of their romantic rendezvous opened both of them to us: in her case by sharing details of their loving memoirs where infatuation was re-enacted; in his case, by displaying the innocent vulnerability of someone who is not used to romantic confessions, and which Josefa summarized as: "this is the first time we have talked about all of it."

Once Pedro left us, with the excuse of having to make dinner that night, Josefa opened even more and slowly embarked herself into a self-revealing journey that gave room to a sensitive ego. Josefa's portrayal as a strong, confident woman was now replaced by a more vulnerable self, the one that allowed her to display a sort of female solidarity with her anthropologist friends. The conversation (mostly in Spanish from this point onward) turned into a more intimate portrayal of Josefa's difficult life. From a very young age, she had been in charge of her younger siblings as her mom, a single mother and head of the household, had to work all day. Josefa remembered this period as the one that kept her from having a real childhood, as she became a full-developed girl by the age of 10, or as she put it: "I did not have the time to be a child." Although she had had a conflicting relationship with her mother while growing up, she admired her for her strength and wisdom including her knowledge of the use of herbs, information that Josefa was now teaching to the children in her center. Things became even more emotional when she told us that she had not seen her father since she was a child, and that she had finally met her many siblings and cousins three years ago, when she visited Puerto Rico in her husband's company.

After a couple of hours, Josefa took us to walking errands through a journey that was both "casually" and strategically planned. By touring us around, she had the opportunity to show us off as well as to display her many connections in the neighborhood, as exercising her role as a liaison between the *El Barrio's* world and the material and symbolic resources of people, knowledge and capital she held from other milieus. The main venue to be visited was the community garden where she was able to let us in by opening the gate with her own key. When this happened, I could not resist the temptation of making a comparison with Gramercy Park (the most famous "gated garden" in the city). Although the differences between both gardens are obvious (they serve different communities and have different purposes) she laughed at my remark, as my observation was not completely inadequate. Although Josefa's community garden had public access during certain hours, only holders of their own plots are the ones able to access it at any time.

Once we got inside the garden I distinguished its margins and within it, a huge piece of land divided into small lots where a variety of plants and fruits blossomed through a disorganized arrange of beautiful colors, shapes and smells. While being there, I could not stop remembering the backyard of the Venezuelan tundra where I used to live in Mérida, a city in the Venezuelan Andes, many years ago. Josefa's garden also reminded me of the magical lands drawn in children's books, particularly given the copious rain that in the past few weeks had done its duty and was partially responsible for the lot's lush resemblance to a tropical paradise. The garden had been a dumper until a few decades ago, but was finally rescued thanks to community pressure and the responsive administration of the local union next door. The union had also hired

a guardian in charge of keeping the basic common areas clean and tidy, while allowing access to the public at specific hours. At that point, I remembered my recent visit to one community garden held by Cambodian refugees in Dallas, and I thought about how remarkable it was to be able to run public projects, such as Josefa's garden, in contested territories currently claimed by hungry developers.

Josefa then took us into a teaching adventure by visiting the different plots, nicely lecturing us about the diverse plants' properties and functions. Different types of mint and lemon balm seemed to be her forte. She recommended rosemary for my hair, and lemon with warm water to protect the immune system from my recurrent colds. Josefa seemed proud of conveying her knowledge of the herbs' different properties, but was vague when asked about how she learned about them. Facing her lack of, almost obvious, systematic and academic knowledge she almost always repeated "my mom taught me about them." Nevertheless, she often acknowledged having used plants without even knowing what some of their effects were, or without clearly understanding how to prepare and use them. The magical touch (as I had seen in other healers) came up when she told stories on how she healed herself after being attacked by a wasp, or when she cured one of her sisters who had gotten burned, by applying a special plant on the skin (Viladrich, 2006b).

I noticed certain delay in her taking us to her own plot, while leading us into a ritualistic ceremony during which she lectured us about on how to appreciate the many properties of the many plants we encountered along the way, as she had done with Jasmine in a previous visit. "Rub here, smell there, touch over there" were all part of the multi-sensorial exercise she tucked us into. Josefa was certainly enjoying the "teaching role" through which she displayed her mastery and knowledge of the smells, textures and properties of a multiplicity of herbs, many of which I had only known through commercial labels (such as peppermint gum) or beverages such as the special mint used to prepare tasteful *mojitos*. Once we got to her plot, I was a little bit surprised about the spontaneous wildness of the plants growing up there. Later on she would comment that Pedro got pissed off a couple of years ago when he decided to plant tomatoes, only to find a few weeks later, that nothing had been left: "It is not that they had taken one tomato here and there, they had taken them all!" This event had discouraged him from trying to cultivate the plot again. This example also depicts Josefa's contradictory relationship towards her community peers, something that I have seen among other community organizers as well. Almost any time either Jasmine or I mentioned how beautiful and healthy the garden looked, Josefa would interject a comment on how much more beautiful the garden had been years ago.

While on the one hand the garden had become part of Josefa's social and healing investment, from which she benefited both in terms of human and social capital; on the other, Josefa had come to resent the social dynamics that she

perceived as being not as fair as she would have liked them to be. Every now and then during our tour, Josefa brought up bitter comments regarding her peers who lacked “community awareness.” For example, she mentioned that some of her *comadres* (older women) would often visit the garden as if they would come to a shopping mall, while carrying her empty bags ready to be filled up with goodies that they would bring back home.

At some point during our excursion, we bumped into a beautiful array of basil plants with long green leaves that reminded me of one of my culinary passions: Italian pesto. I promised to bring pesto next time. Close to the end of our visit, Josefa pulled out a few plants from her plot and gave them to us. These were beautiful onions ready for our dinner table. This became for me an indicator that she was finally satisfied with our visit. Neither had she felt taken advantage of, nor did she need anything else in return. It was now her turn to give something back to us.

To be or not to be: identity dilemmas and contradictory selves

One clear aspect that characterized Josefa’s discursive self-representation was her apprehension to define her trade as protecting herself from stereotypical labels. One thing was obvious: Josefa was both a community broker and an *ad hoc* entrepreneur. The center was much more than a community/educational enterprise: it was her life program, her vehicle to personal transcendence and to social success. Any visitor to her domain brought the potential of becoming a volunteer that she would not let go. That is one of the reasons for her delaying and postponing a second (formal) interview: she needed to keep us wanting more as a way to make sure we would return. I also felt she needed people to listen to her, particularly when sharing her painful past with us.

Josefa’s storytelling abilities contributed to the recreation of a social aura that combined spiritual wisdom with entrepreneurship. Certainly, she had fought to keep her center alive while paying rent, recruiting suitable students, getting teachers and resources. And yet, the computers hardly worked, there was no internet access and the copy machine (big and impressive) had not worked for a very long time. Above all, Josefa was a struggling woman, a community artist, an educator, mentor and social leader at the same time. All her roles came and went in contradictory ways, as they did not follow the progressive linearity of success and failure expected by mainstream society. Josefa’s portrayal of her own life is typical of what I have seen in other women – who are also practitioners of Santeria and spiritual healing in NYC: they create public personas as self-made heroes while discursively portraying themselves as matriarchal archetypes, from which real and fictional kin become related. They keep a plethora of nuclear and fictitious families together via food, gathering and rituals and, as in this case, through community activities combined with holistic education and healing (Viladrich, 2006a).

The million-dollar question on which Jasmine and I spent some time after fieldwork, was: is Josefa a healer? Was her healing knowledge the basis for her trade? Was she a community broker who relied on a “healing” label to legitimize her public persona? For once, she did not charge either for her healing balms or for her managerial capital when passing along her herbal knowledge. Josefa’s healing capital (the symbolic and financial trade involved in her healing transactions) seemed to be part of an educational kit that she mostly displayed with her young apprentices, and even with visitors when taking them to the garden where her healing knowledge would become practical philosophy.

On a personal note, I felt a strong bond with Josefa that fluctuated between waves of identification and difference. Yes, it was easy for me to communicate with her at a basic human level, the one that interconnects the field of experiences and emotions, of losses, dreams as well as of unaccomplished ambitions. As Josefa, I had also been a wandering soul between cultures, an immigrant in between an English and a Spanish domain. We both, in one way or another, had clung to romantic tales of self-made womanhood. In Josefa’s case, the authoritative way through which she depicted her career, goals and trajectory was aimed at supporting her own aura of public persona; in my case my manic obsession with work and anthropology had become my own path to self-transcendence. We both had an uncanny combination of strength and vulnerability, as well as of charisma and fragility, which brought us closer to each other than we both actually realized at that brief, but intense, point in time.

Fieldwork encounters and reflexive epistemologies

Qualitative research greatly relies on fieldwork, a research method that has the potential to reveal, as no other, the cultural backdrop upon which social science discoveries often come to light. By diving into a novel self-reflexive exercise that brought up experiential pieces of my own life as an ethnographer (see Denzin, 1989, 1999), this article has presented my own discoveries as both researcher and subject, which far from being oppositional categories nurtured each other in the production of knowledge. Fieldwork resembles a unique voyage to a world of interpersonal uncertainties away from controlled laboratory conditions where results are highly predicted, and where unexpected outcomes often become outliers of uncanny discoveries. Far from being a stereotyped pre-rehearsed pantomime, the field experience brings in us diverse social personas that allow us to plan different roles (Goffman, 1997) while making us vulnerable during our often unexpected encounters in the field (Crapanzano, 1977; Behar, 1996; Tsuda, 2003).

By exploring Josefa’s different roles as a strong and vulnerable self-made healer, I have attempted to portray how Latinos’ locations are multivocal, not only in the sense of being determined by multiple factors (e.g., race and ethnicity, class, nationality, gender and personal history), but also because of the

unforeseen social interactions in which knowledge acquires meaning in relation to others. Hopefully, new stories in *Latino Studies* will continue revealing the ways in which the production of reliable and valid data is strappingly linked to building up trustful and respectful liaisons with study participants, a lesson that Josefa has taught us well.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the collaboration of Jasmine Gartner in the fieldwork aspect of this project that gave origin to this article. This research study was possible thanks to the assistance of many ethnographers including Antonella Fabri, Andrea Feduzi, Jasmine Gartner, Sabina Gritta, María Gomez, Vincent Goldberg, Joel Naatus, Helga Perez, Martha Rodriguez, Cassandra Torrico. Lori Bukiewicz and Maria Angela Soto were pivotal in the analysis of the research results. I also express my gratitude to Suzanne Oboler for her insightful comments and suggestions. I particularly thank the study participants, mostly Josefa, for their teaching lessons that have continued helping me grow both as a scholar and as a human being. This project has been possible due to a generous grant awarded by the Russo Gift and two PSC-CUNY grants, as well as the ongoing sponsorship of the Schools of the Health Professions, the School of Health Sciences and the Urban Public Health Program at Hunter College of the City University of New York.

About the author

Anahí Viladrich is an award-winning medical anthropologist with long-term research experience and publishing record on gender, immigration and health in Argentina (her home country) as well as in the US. Among her several degrees, she received a Ph.D. with Distinction and a M.Phil. in Sociomedical Sciences (anthropology) from Columbia University in 2003, and a M.A. with honors from the New School University in 1999. She is currently a faculty member of the UPH program at Hunter College and director of the Immigration and Health Initiative, a program aimed at sponsoring research, teaching and advocacy on immigrants' health.

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Latino Studies (2007) 5, 364–373. doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600268

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