

“You Just Belong to Us”: Tales of Identity and Difference With Populations to Which the Ethnographer Belongs

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This article, based on the first ethnographic study on the Argentine minority in New York City, addresses some of the conflicting issues emerging from ethnographers' involvement with research populations to which they belong, including the implications of being perceived as members of the same “flock.” The article explores participants' self-representations in terms of class and racial and/or ethnic categories vis-à-vis others including the ethnographer, also from Argentine origin. The *Whiteness strategy* and the *cultural divide* were two important discursive tools that allowed lighter-skinned study participants to place themselves closer to the White majority, while challenging their perceived socioeconomic dislocation in mainstream America. The ethnographer's self-representation in the field was also characterized by tensions and adjustments, which relied on the exchange of social resources (social capital) as the unexpected backdrop for trust and reciprocity to be continuously negotiated.

Keywords: *immigrants in the United States; Latinos; Argentina; auto-ethnography; race and ethnicity; class; downward mobility*

Becoming an Indigenous Ethnographer: “Not Just One of Them”

This is an article that I have longed to write, a sort of self-revealing account of the intertwining field notes that accompanied the formal data collection process when conducting ethnographic research for my dissertation. The current study, the first on Argentines living in New York City (NYC), focused on the exploration of immigrants' class and social careers and their reliance on

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diverse health systems to solve their health problems with the assistance of their informal social networks (Viladrich, 2003). My ethnographic experiences revealed the backdrop of my endearing and often conflicting encounters with my fellow compatriots, as well as the puzzling self-struggle to redefine myself vis-à-vis them.

As a female member of the promised Argentine so-called intelligentsia, my migratory path to the United States in the mid-1990s had been initially blessed by the fortune of being among the chosen ones by the academic lotto of international fellowships, which guaranteed a modest share of the American dream. By being accepted within the realm of scholarly entrepreneurship in NYC, I attempted to disguise myself as another member of the want-to-be international community of intellectuals where merit, disciplinary orientation, and personal talent are identity indicators. These not only gave me a purpose and role as a graduate student, first at the New School University and at Columbia University later on, but also helped alleviate the itching of my blurred identities. For a few years, I was able to remove myself (physically as well as symbolically) from my own ethnic community in NYC and from the theoretical and personal issues that my own move to America had brought. Not without pain, I strove to learn how to play along with the group of privileged expatriates who tend to behave more like intellectual jet setters than like outcast fellows on their own. It was only when I decided to choose my own national collective as the centerpiece of my research agenda, that I began to recognize in others the mere survival strategies that had inconspicuously become part of my own.

In the following pages, I illustrate my own ethnographic journey that led me to discover Argentines' diversity in NYC along with their rhetorics of difference in terms of race and/or ethnicity and social status. This article suggestively reveals the mismatches of my frustrated expectations and my bewilderment toward the ways through which research participants depicted themselves, as well as the ethnographer, during fieldwork. In addition, my own self-representation in the field was characterized by tensions and adjustments that relied on the exchange of social resources (social capital) as the unexpected backdrop for trust and reciprocity to be continuously, and often painfully, exchanged.

My fellow nationals and I played with the dilemmatic construction of our mutual similarities and differences as an ongoing process of interpersonal agreements in which trust, interaction, and reciprocity were continuously renegotiated. If I was often considered as different from them (particularly when sharing our distinct migratory paths), it is not less true than I was rather frequently claimed as "one of them." This was based on our sharing of an Argentine status, which operated as a birthmark that forced us to pay tribute to endogamic ties in the form of ethnic obligations (emotional as well as material) to each other. To a certain extent, this article is about exploring the paths through which we learn about the social categories that define us (in terms of race and/or ethnicity, class, and gender, etc.), which not only allow us to play diverse roles in our everyday dramas (Goffman, 1997) but also empower and

make us vulnerable during our often unexpected encounters in the field (Behar, 1996; Crapanzano, 1977; Tsuda, 2003). This article illustrates this process of similarities and differences as two sides of the same coin which, although bringing aesthetic moments of mutual understanding during fieldwork, were also the source of elusive resentments, inconclusive demands, and somehow painful acted-out indifferences.

Argentines in the United States: Uncovering Their Invisible Paths

Although Argentine immigrants' arrival to the United States can be traced to the late 1950s, their presence in this country has only recently become noticeable as the result of Argentina's frail economy that has resulted on a rising migratory exodus. Following a century of incoming European immigrants from Spain, Italy, Poland, and Russia, a reverse migratory process began to take place in Argentina in the 1950s, characterized by emigration to the United States and Europe. Although in following decades, foreign nationals continued entering the Argentine territory (mostly from neighboring countries and Asia, see Oteiza, Novick, & Aruj, 2000), migrant outflows were increasingly encouraged by political instability, the deterioration of the domestic economy, and rising rates of unemployment.

The first significant Argentine emigration wave in the 1960s coincided with the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965, which sponsored a second stream of immigrants to the United States in the 20th century, with an emphasis on those from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Zuccotti, 1987). Successive migratory flows were motivated by economic and political crises in Argentina, mostly in the 1960s and early 1970s, which peaked during the political turmoil prior to the coup d'état in 1976. This period was characterized by state terrorism that launched the eradication of "subversive groups" (including guerrilla organizations, union members, and political dissidents) and left a balance of more than 30,000 people who "disappeared" in the hands of paramilitary groups (see Maletta, Szwarcberg, & Schneider, 1986; National Council for Scientific and Technological Research, 1984). This phase would end in the early 1980s, when a new democratic regime (following the defeat in the Falklands war) supported the return of many of those who had left the country in previous decades. Nevertheless, a clear returning policy was never implemented, and many of those who had initially gone back to their country (or thought about it) decided to emigrate again, given the uncertainties of the Argentine economy. Recent migratory streams have been encouraged neither by political persecution nor by authoritarian practices but by the instability of the Argentine economy marked by recurring recession, and structural unemployment because of the continued wane of the manufacturing sector, as in other Latin American countries (see Margolis, 1998; Marmora, 2004; Viladrich, 2003).

Although a few books have been written about Argentine emigrants (all in Spanish), to the best of my knowledge little research exists on the migratory experience of Argentines in the United States, with the exception of Friedenbergs and colleagues' excellent work on the well-being of female Argentine migrants (see Friedenbergs, 2002; Friedenbergs, Imperiale, & Skovron, 1988). As with other immigrant populations in the United States such as Cubans (see Pedraza-Bailey, 1985), studies on Argentine emigrants have generally portrayed "successful" case stories, which have also been dominant in newspaper articles and popular magazines. Political persecution, economic instability, and Argentines' better opportunities to succeed abroad are the major themes of articles and books that have mostly focus on middle-class Argentine *émigrés* (Barón, del Carril, & Gómez, 1995; Boccanera, 1999; Zuccotti, 1987). Literary and testimonial essays have underscored the personal experiences of educated individuals who have joined the number of economic and political exiles in different periods (Yelin, 2003), and which have scantily described the plight of more recent economic immigrants in the United States (Melamed, 2002). Although this literature represents an enormous contribution to our understanding of Argentina's contemporary diaspora, it has nevertheless underscored the image of White, well-educated Argentines able to camouflage in mainstream America by joining prestigious corporations and research institutions. These representations have effaced the presence of those who are neither members of the educated middle class nor conform to the image of the white European inheritor.

The current study, on which this article is based, has made visible the lives of those who until very recently had not made the first page of the media: the undocumented, the blue-collar worker, and the dark-skinned working-class Argentine from the countryside who, in spite of their subtle presence in the United States, have become foremost protagonists of past and recent migratory streams. In particular, this article conveys the voices of those representing a recent wave of newcomers, who have arrived in the United States for the past 10 years, and a cohort of old-time senior residents (mostly unskilled and semi-skilled workers) who came to the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, encouraged by the United States opening frontiers to Latin America under the motto of its endless possibilities for upward mobility.¹ Finally, my own story is intertwined with those representing these two migratory streams with the hope of providing a breathing, and still ongoing narrative, of Argentine immigrants' past hopes and future promises.

Class Clashes

Some are born touched by a good star, others are born crashed, and others are just lucky.

—Freda, Argentine undocumented immigrant

Contrary to the myth of the American dream that promises upward mobility to all committed to hard work, many of the Argentine immigrants I met and interviewed during fieldwork reported steady paths of social stagnation and downward mobility even after periods of promising social ascension, as with other groups in the United States (see Newman, 1988/1999). This was the case of those who, in spite of their many years in NYC, had not upgraded their educational credentials and had remained quiescent in low-prestige occupations. The phantom (and reality) of downward mobility often clashed against these immigrants' idealized versions of upward trajectory in the United States. Even when they had been able to make a living in the city, which would have been impossible for them to earn in Argentina, they often experienced devaluated statuses in terms of job occupations and social recognition, which often constituted painful reminders of the lost social privileges (material and symbolic) they had enjoyed in Argentina. As it happens with other immigrant populations, I met doctors working as cleaning ladies, lawyers performing as drivers in private car service companies, and architects working as landscapers (Viladrich, in press-b, in press-c). In many cases, they were still faithful to the middle class *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1985) that had marked their tastes and cultural preferences in their country of origin, for which the memories of a relatively recent past collided against their current working and living conditions.

Some even experienced a process of double downward mobility, which involved not only their economic downfall but also their removal from the social networks and social capital (e.g., professional groups, business chambers) that could have helped them access valuable resources in the form of contacts, referrals, and U.S. visa sponsorships (see Fernández Kelly, 1995). As a result, their status discrepancies were more often experienced as class privileges no longer valid in the host society, which often made them resent the ad hoc categories applied to them (e.g., as nanny and construction workers).

Endurance of an undocumented status through time not only constitutes a structural hurdle to immigrants' dreams of upward mobility but also reinforces their negative self-images as disenfranchised humans in society. For many immigrants, their arrival and settlement in the United States implied a triple process of dislocated identity signed by economic downward mobility, a symbolic loss of their citizenship rights by becoming (legal or undocumented) foreign aliens, and an ethnic and racial displacement from their belonging to the White majority in Argentina, to their sudden joining of an imprecise minority (as Latinos and South American immigrants) in the United States.

The consequences of holding an undocumented status usually buttresses immigrants' subjective experiences of exclusion, as a continuous reminder of their unlawful permanence in the United States, usually intensified by the potential threat of being discriminated, denounced, and deported (Chávez, 1992). Therefore, undocumented immigrants often claim a negotiation between their visibility and their social marginality, as a dialectic struggle endured day by day for the purpose of guaranteeing a safety passage to the (elu-

sive) American dream. While social invisibility allows them to maneuver without risk of being identified and deported (e.g., by keeping a low profile, and working in menial jobs that they would not dare try in Argentina), it also means remaining in low-paid occupations and in networks of low *multiplexity* (poor in social capital and contacts for jobs and visas' sponsorships), which pose serious obstacles to the advancement of their social careers (including upward mobility) in the United States.

The following story conspicuously illustrates this point. Samara was a 53-year-old middle-class woman who, along with her husband and daughter, had come to NYC in 1990. They arrived to the city as tourists to work in a business they had invested money in along with other friends. After a year, things had not turned out to be as they had expected, as their friends not only fired them from the company but also threatened them with having them deported. In spite of their difficult situation, Samara and her family decided to remain illegally in the United States for the purpose of working and recovering part of the money they had lost. Nonetheless, things got worse economically, and family conflicts arose. Samara got divorced, and her daughter decided to return to Argentina a few years later. Although Samara's daughter had lived most of her life in the United States, the burden of being an "illegal alien" was too much for her to bear. Suddenly, Samara was left completely alone in NYC and felt committed to remain in the city in spite of the desolation and vulnerability she was experiencing at the time:

For the first time in my life I felt an enormous challenge. After having had a good life most of my life, here I was, a 50-year-old woman, illegal in the United States, without a husband and without my daughter. And although I was working in three jobs at the same time, I was not making enough money to have a place by myself.

The truth is that I did not want to go back to Argentina empty handed, and I kept hoping that things would get better here. You see, as an illegal immigrant this country punishes you. Nobody gives you an opportunity to get out of this situation, as in my daughter's case, who had to pay twice as much as any legal resident to be able to attend college.

No doubt did the source of my ethnographic rapport emerge from the power of my informants' narratives to bring light (and new meanings) to their invisible paths in America and to remake (at least discursively) the social trajectories that they felt disrupted with little sense of continuity.² Although during the ethnographic journey to my own ethnic community, I had tried to develop multicultural eyes to read, interpret, and write my respondents' stories through my feminine lenses, my conflicting game of similarities and differences with them (we were similar in terms of background and different regarding our social trajectories) worked as a synergetic force of ongoing attractions and rejections.

My encounters with interviewees such as Samara, often navigated between *raptus* of exuberant closeness (e.g., long, intense sessions accompanied by pastries) followed by episodes of deranged resentment. What brought us nearer was our uttering of a common belonging to a cherished symbolic capital: the remembrance of Buenos Aires's Parisian cafes, anecdotic tales of visits to tropical islands, the social enjoyment of the bohemian cosmopolitan life, all which proved my acquiescent recognition of my compatriots' past grandeur. Nevertheless, almost invariably, what brought us apart was the intangible distance of our social trajectories drawn by our contrasting destinies in America. A distance that also became physical any time I left the field to enter my own world of protected social and figurative legality.

Tricky Mirrors: Reflections on an Ethnographer's Migratory Path

As members of the same diaspora communities, immigrants continuously construct and negotiate their identity marks vis-à-vis those who they consider as witnesses and referees of their own successes and failures. While I was often perceived by study participants as more fragile in terms of gender, life experiences in the United States, or age, my unspoken status (in terms of educational credentials and institutional affiliation) often created sources of tension, particularly with those who had formerly belonged to the White middle class in Argentina, had overstayed in the United States, and therefore no longer had valid visas. My interactions with Samara, and with others in similar circumstances, almost always brought up comparisons of what they considered as my "lucky" path in the United States, based on what they assumed as an unjust distribution of social opportunities. This conflict was precisely more evident among those closer to me in terms of human and cultural capital than with those with whom I had little in common.

Like many of my interviewees, I was also a newcomer in NYC, and I had also struggled to master a foreign language, which had often increased my perception of surrounding hostilities. And as many of them, I had also held blurred legal statuses at some points of my legal career, which had eventually led me to subtle forms of discriminatory labeling (e.g., stereotypical nicknames as a Latina). Nevertheless, my role as an ethnographer and my academic credentials constituted enough proof that I had already overcome these barriers and that, in the language of the original Chicago School, I had skipped a deleterious path into social assimilation. But had I? What many of my compatriots may have not seen at the time, or not so clearly, is that I was also trying to make sense of my broken class trajectory in the United States by exposing myself to the painstakingly process of academic achievement. This also meant losing my previous identity as a professional in Argentina by becoming another struggling dreamer sitting in the line of awaiting success.

Migratory accounts demand the retrospective reconstruction (and examination) of a person's life to make sense of the present. All storytelling comprises only a dainty cross-section of an individual's multiple circumstances that turn into a single narrative only through the process of repeating it to others (and to oneself), while trying to make sense of a series of capricious processes that are usually far from the syncopated symphony of organized life events. There is always a before and after the migratory hiatus, a *tour-de-force* from where newcomers start counting down their stories of triumphs and frustrations in the new land, a place no longer dreamed as the "land of possibilities," but a terrain where new boundaries, vulnerabilities, and hidden talents are waiting to unfold. And I was no exception to the fate of making sense of my present by relying on my cherished past.

While in Argentina I had been a young scholar who was slowly moving up the academic ladder (by building my resume based on having many jobs and a multifield research career), my voyage to the United States disrupted that past and left me alone to deal with a frugal present that would eventually make sense of an uncertain future. Particularly during my early years in the United States, I became vulnerable to the capricious rules of the English language in mainstream institutions—with little tolerance for my insufficient skills, while I suffered from a severe status depreciation marked by my new label as a struggling foreign graduate student, with a visa that did not allow me to work, and debts that were piling up faster than my academic achievements. Soon I began treasuring my former autonomous identities, whose traces were only found in dusty Spanish-written diplomas with little value in the American intellectual milieu. If I was going to make it, I had to face the challenge of reinventing myself, by retelling my past, and hoping for a better but still uncertain future.

Class trajectories are not written in advance and, along with the synergistic liaison between structural determinants and agency, are subjected to unforeseen and often conflicting forces. By examining how my informants compared to each other during fieldwork, I steadily began a process of diving into the subtle scars left by my inconclusive passage to America. Through time, my ethnographic adventure led me to a strapping self-analysis through which I began to reflect on my own pitiful comparisons to other compatriots, whom I perceived as more fortunate beholders of the American dream, and whose privileged social origins had allowed them to skip the mismatches between their hopeful expectations and their surrounding structural constraints.

If by the end of the data-gathering process I was able to fully appreciate the unique opportunities that had been given to me (a doctoral degree around the corner and a new family), it is not less true that I was also ready to come to grips with the obliterated losses brought by my migratory journey, including being exposed to a perennial struggle to make ends meet and lacking a strong network of old-time friends and family, which back in Argentina had protected me emotionally and materially. Through time, however, I learned to accept my tri-

umphs and failures, and my own downward mobility, as part of the unavoidable trade of my all-in-control persona for a doubtful self. At last, by questioning the classed, racial, and gendered identity of my study participants, I ended up engaging into a sort of healthy introspection through which, far from retelling my own story as a grandiose saga, I was finally able to accept my own frustrated dreams.

Color Gradients: Racial Markers of Social Difference

The Argentines are a bunch of Italians speaking Spanish, who wish they were British, and act like they are French.

—Anonymous graffiti

Miranda was a working-class woman in her early 60s who, along with her husband, had worked hard to keep her family together in the United States. They were proud of their children and grandchildren whom they sometimes brought along to the numerous Argentine activities they were involved with. One day, I was talking with Miranda during a fund-raising event, when I casually mentioned that I was planning to meet with members of another Argentine group that organizes activities targeting disenfranchised Latino children in NYC. Immediately, she pulled me apart and warned me:

M: "Don't get together with them, they are not like us."

A: "What do you mean?" I replied.

M: "Don't you see? They are *morochitos* (darker skinned kids); they are not good company for you, just stay with us."

As appalling as Miranda's statements may sound, the case is that they rely on a public rhetoric in Argentina that badgers and condemns darker skinned and Creole populations. Miranda's remarks were also uttered as a class statement against dealing with those from lower social backgrounds. With her warning, Miranda was drawing a racial distinction between "us" (Whites) and "them" (darker skinned people) based on her personal expectations of social recognition. Throughout the years, Miranda had attempted to improve her social capital and social status by participating in Argentine community organizations and ethnic events, where she usually cooked Argentine delicacies and waited on for hours at diverse food stands. By reinforcing her so-called White ascription, Miranda was drawing the illusion of upgrading her social status, while stressing her belonging to a respected Argentine minority within the Latino community. After all, if, according to Miranda, we did not belong to the same social class, our light skin color would become a shared trait that would make us "look alike." However, other indicators also worked toward establishing liaisons between my informants and me, as the following field notes from April 15, 2001, reveal:

Today I received a phone call from Ms. X (an Argentine community leader). She sounded very anxious and told me that she was concerned because she had received a phone call from a woman who also wanted to conduct research on the Argentine community in NYC: "I told her that we had already a researcher doing this and we did not need her." Ms. X, who is usually a very kind and open person, sounded visibly upset with this woman's request and actually asked me to turn her off. I told her that I did not have exclusive rights to study either this or any other group, and that she would be allowed to do so as long as she was respectful with the community and followed a code of ethics and human subject protocols. Because Ms. X could not convince me to discourage the woman, she continued supporting her disapproval: "She is not an Argentine like you and us; she is a Mexican American or something, and does not even speak Spanish well . . . She doesn't have any right to study us, why doesn't she get out and get involved with those of *her own* race?"

Frankly, not only had I not heard these sorts of statements from Ms. X before but, contrary to Miranda's remarks, it also seemed to me that Ms. X's request was part of a strategy to cover up other motives for her refusal to help the researcher. Early on in our conversation, I got the feeling that Ms. X was relying on a racial argument to justify other reasons for her being upset. After one half hour on the phone and a few probes, it finally came out that Ms. X felt that the researcher had been disrespectful and had treated her as a sort of "guinea pig" for cultural exploration. According to Ms. X, the student had introduced herself with a "tone of superiority" and had requested information without properly addressing Ms. X with the consideration she deserved according to her age and status, as an elderly person who plays important roles within the Argentine community. Furthermore, the woman demanded permission to attend fundraising events for free, for which she had not even been invited to. Had the researcher approached Ms. X with a more humble attitude, she would have reacted in a very different way, and would have probably welcomed her to participate in the activities organized by the Argentine community in Queens.

Ms. X's remarks above not only reveal the exchangeability between the terms *race* and *ethnicity* among many of my informants but also depict how discourses of ethnic and/or racial difference can become useful rhetoric tools to justify personal standpoints rooted in other sources of inequality. Ethnic distinctions are often utilized as political devices to support ethnic groups' antagonisms, even when the source of their discrepancies is not ethnic, but economic or political. The episode with Ms. X also illustrates study participants' utilization of their "Argentineanness" as a specific ethnic category that somehow conflicts with their Latino ascription, and which reveals an identity anxiety brought by the NYC's multicultural milieu.

Once in the United States, most of my Argentine informants were soon introduced into the game of American racial and/or ethnic categories and learned fast how to play them to represent themselves and others, particularly by relying on skin color and cultural traits as main markers of their socioeconomic differences. Therefore, race and ethnicity were played out as rhetorics of

social inequalities, in which immigrants' phenotypic aspects (e.g., facial features and skin tonalities) became indicators (in the discursive level) of their social differences. These color-gradient distinctions respond to a "rhetoric of exclusion" (see Stolke, 1995), in which skin color and class become intertwined in a process of social stratification (see Ortner, 1998; Viladrich, 2003).

Some of my informants' narratives also reveal subtle markers of social and racial hierarchy, such as the discourse of "Europeanness" held by descendants of Spaniards and Italians, who consider themselves as "surrogated" White Europeans, and therefore as holders of superior education and higher social statuses than their dark-skinned fellow citizens in NYC. Most of my interviewees were concerned about the frequent derogatory popular images representing Latinos and/or Hispanics in the United States and tried to distance themselves from the "poor illegal Hispanic" while placing themselves away from the "projective hysteria" (Spindler & Spindler, 1992), which blames immigrants for all U.S. problems (including economy, health care, and education). Some interviewees relied on the so-called cultural divide to support their claims of cultural difference (and superiority) by identifying themselves as members of a so-called model minority and, therefore, as more educated, sophisticated, and polished than other Argentines and other Latinos (see Gotanda, 1996). In other words, if impoverished middle-class Argentines felt that they deserve better, their references to their prestigious ethnic, racial, and cultural heritage were there to support their rights to a better life in the United States (as in the Brazilian case, see Margolis, 1998). In sum, the Whiteness strategy and the cultural divide constituted two important rhetoric devices that not only placed my lighter skinned compatriots closer to the White majority but also challenged their perceived socioeconomic dislocation in mainstream America.

As a descendent from northern Italians and Spaniards, I was also initially surprised by the United States' fixed ethnic categories that combine skin color, country of origin, and self-defined ethnicity. Having considered myself as a "White" Argentine for most of my life, my entry into the United States' ethnic landscape had brought up initial conflicts related to my ethnic self-perception as a European "descendent" vis-à-vis my newly achieved status as a Latina. Through time, however, I genuinely began to consider myself a member of the Latino aggregate, an identity that led me to relate to the lives and struggles of so many of my peers from Spanish-speaking countries. In addition, my newly achieved Latina status allowed me to deconstruct the ethnocentric color-blind standpoint, which for so long had made me (and many of my compatriots) unaware of the racial divide that has been pervasive in my home country as it is explored next (see Oteiza et al., 2000).

Homero was a 71-year-old man from Tucumán, a province located in the northwest of Argentina. Born in a peasant family, he and his family moved to Buenos Aires when he was a child, in search for new jobs that had blossomed during Argentina's first industrial period. As in the case of other dark-skinned working-class Argentines, he seemed comfortable with his self-representation

as a Hispanic in the United States, although he felt loyal to his Argentine roots. Homero was also aware of the Whiteness syndrome of many of his compatriots, who relied on their own racial prejudices to judge others. He was critical of what he called the “Argentine racism” against people from other Latin American countries and defended his inclusion into the Latino cluster from a political standpoint and his own experiences as a working-class Creole:

I am a peasant, a little Black person, I don't want to call attention and above all, I don't feel like a European as many Argentines do. I am a short, dark-skinned man; I don't feel identified with the image of the European. Indeed, many of them [referring to other Argentines] are racist; they criticize Dominicans and call other Central Americans “Indians.” Like the other day, I saw in *Cristina* (a Spanish TV talk show) an Argentine woman *despotricando* (complaining) against other Latin American races as less educated. . . . What a shame!

Once a friend told me: what do you expect from a country [Argentina] if the old ones believe that they are Europeans and their children pretend to be American?

Darker skinned working-class immigrants such as Homero did not have to migrate to the United States to learn about racism or prejudice because they had experienced them at home. They not only did not claim to be part of the White U.S. majority but were also less dumbfounded than their lighter skinned fellow citizens for their inclusion into the Hispanic and/or Latino aggregate in the United States. Furthermore, because many had experienced poverty in Argentine, they seemed less affected by the obstacles to upward mobility that afflicted many of their middle-class peers in NYC.

Bounded Solidarity and the Challenges of Social Capital

Many of the subtle tensions I experienced when dealing with middle-class Argentines who had suffered downward mobility in the United States were absent from my daily interactions with senior working-class compatriots who, after decades of hard work, had built their own versions of social recognition via their modest incorporation into blue-collar America. Most of these immigrants were long-term residents in NYC, who had arrived in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and who had joined an array of Argentine community organizations through time. Many of these organizations operated in Queens, particularly because of the existence of a modest number of Argentine businesses in the area, and because of the large number of Argentine residents living in neighborhoods such as Jackson Heights and Corona.

By becoming members of community organizations, senior immigrants had been able to fulfill their aspirations of social approval in three ways: status recognition, the exercise of a philanthropic ethos, and the construction of a community of memory. Many of the semiskilled and blue-collar Argentines I met during fieldwork alternated their jobs as superintendents, mechanics, or

domestic workers with their chores as presidents, secretaries, or treasurers of diverse community groups that bestowed them with an aura of social prestige. They would often “represent” the overall Argentine minority during ethnic events, such as the Hispanic parade or official receptions at the Argentine consulate.

My identity marker as an Argentine (e.g., references to my past in Buenos Aires and knowledge of idiosyncratic cultural norms) almost always opened the doors to community activities and social fields where the collective purpose was precisely the social reconstruction of an Argentine community abroad. What other reason would be needed to justify my presence in Argentine festivities than reinforcing my loyalty to the same national group to which I belong? My friends from Argentine community organizations and I nurtured the re-creation of a far away land, through allegoric social iconographies of an urbanite Argentine *barrio* that we had left behind, simulacrums that protected us from the amorphous sense of vulnerability nurtured by the NYC’s multiethnic milieu. Our homesickness for Buenos Aires let us play a performance “as if” we were still there, as a theatrical *mise-en-scène* of vernacular social spaces.

As I was studying social capital, I did not realize until much later that my own ethnographic encounters would face the same limitations of what my own research was meant to discover: How do Argentines exchange precious resources based on mutual solidarity and nonmonetary transactions? What are the limits of accessing resources (e.g., including information) via informal channels? *Social capital* is usually defined as the access to resources via relationships, based on belonging to a same community of interest, trust and loyalty (see Bourdieu, 1985). As Portes (1998) noted, what characterizes the provision and reception of social capital is that reciprocity terms are neither univocal nor scheduled in advance. Although, in some cases, it may seem that no payment is involved, exchanges may be delayed in time and specification of mutual benefits may not be explicit (see also Coleman, 1990; Viladrich, in press-c).

During fieldwork, my informants and I had shared more than questions and answers, as we became involved in social relationships that required the exchange of valuable information based on mutual trust and openness (Viladrich, in press-a). By the same token, if I had been accepted as a reliable compatriot among my peers, I was lately expected to fulfill my obligations as an active associate of their community endeavors. And although my research study had been the legitimate label that had initially welcomed me as “one of them,” this proved not to be enough in the long run. Through time, the symbolic value of my social exchanges with community members surpassed the formalities of a consent form and commanded my acquiescence to the rights and obligations attached to my membership status.

At last, by becoming an “accepted” member within the Argentine minority in NYC, I had finally engaged myself into the same theoretical and methodological conundrums brought by non-monetary social transactions.³ Indeed, my interviewees’ “confessions of truth” (paraphrasing Foucault, 1984) became

priceless, in the sense that they expected much more than I had initially anticipated and often demanded my subscribing to a full-time affiliation to community gatherings and enduring social interactions.⁴ Had I (totally) subscribed to these demands, I would have probably been compelled to erase the symbolic distance between my (other) world and theirs, as paying the duties of bounded solidarity expected by members of the same ethnic group.

Conclusions

This article shows a few voices that have allowed me to illustrate the contradictory grid of race, social status, and gender on which I decided to become a player in the course of an ethnographic study on Argentine immigrants in NYC. By doing so, I illustrated how immigrants' locations are not only multivocal, signed by classed positions, social careers, ethnic identity and personal history, but also relational in the sense that they are constructed and achieve meaning vis-à-vis others.

By diving into a novel auto-ethnography exercise (which brought up experiential pieces of my own life as an ethnographer, see Denzin, 1989, 1999), I was pulled into my own living history as an immigrant in NYC that brought up new questions: To what extent have I become an indigenous ethnographer during fieldwork? Indigenous to whom? Do I have the right to validate my observations for the simple fact of belonging to a theoretically "homogeneous" ethnic group, in which I have had the privilege of performing as an insider and outsider at my own leisure?

My role as a "native" has not carried the for-granted assumption that I hold the cultural competence to interpret my interviewees' discursive moods and cultural practices. One good lesson I relearned during fieldwork is that to be a total ethnic insider is a condescending fantasy. There is no such thing as a homogenous ethnic minority, and the limits I faced during fieldwork would not have been very different from the ones that I often encounter dealing with Argentines when I am not doing fieldwork. Although I have tried to do ethnography of the particular (paraphrasing Abu-Lughod, 1993), I have probably misrepresented some of my informants by interpreting myself. And in an attempt for understanding layers after layers of meanings (now paraphrasing Geertz, 1977), my ultimate discursive tools have been permeated by my efforts to make sense of my compatriots' life narratives in time and place.⁵ And probably, as Hermes to Zeus, my work has only told partial truths due to my limited frame of experience (Crapanzano, 1986).

Within the delicate balance of structure of opportunity, social conditions, and serendipity, my informants and I have followed (and continued to follow) different paths, and different ways to see others and ourselves (see He & Phillion, 2001). And yes indeed, my informants have not been prefixed into stagnant categories but have been active players and mobile targets of contra-

dictory subjectivity, personal experiences, and self-conscious narratives (Behar, 1996; Clifford & Marcus, 1986). They have continued inventing themselves by telling, retelling, creating, and weaving more than one story from which to make sense of their unthreaded migratory status. They and I have constructed accounts of our localized points of subjective experience from where we assemble (and imagine) promising trajectories that, more often than what we would want to admit, are still unaccomplished and still holding as a promise.

And yes, the field experience changed me, no wonder it did. As it may be clear by now, I had hidden motivations for conducting the current study, which were revealed as underlying anxieties that accompanied my own migratory process along the way. Self-reflexivity has lately achieved a new meaning for some of us, members of 21st-century diasporas, for whom the realm of globalized networks has transformed us into outsiders and insiders of diverse groups in multiple latitudes at the same time. My interactions with my compatriots have long been pervaded by paradoxical relationships, in which our re-creation of a transnational ethos has hardly been able to make up for the homesickness we feel for our beloved Argentina. In the end, I found in the ethnographic field what I had not been able to uncover anywhere else: this sense of belonging (of being one of them) even if compared upon, differentiated from, and competed against.

My own journey from centralized individualization in my own country to my peripheral role in the U.S.-centered intellectual geography (see Anzaldúa, 1999) left me at the farewell of my own ethnographic adventure with a variety of unsolved conundrums: Who am I in multicultural America? Am I a member of the amorphous Latino aggregate or do I also claim my European roots, as many of my interviewees do, to pinpoint a more sophisticated background that will allow me to underscore my ethnic differences? How have my own social networks, including the ones I developed in the field, led me to achieve my own share of social capital that has helped draw my path to the American dream, if any? Of course, the answer to these questions has been, and still is, part of the ongoing self-reflexive mood that, more often than I would like to acknowledge, has characterized my everyday encounters with the “exotic” others in myself. In the end, my ethnographic adventure became a coming of age that allowed me to write my personal journey in America as another piece of a colorful migratory quilt on which I have also begun weaving my own signature. And more than a practice of finding who I am through my deconstructive *mélange* of fieldwork identities, it has lately turned into the inquisition of who I will, eventually, become.

Notes

1. Although Argentines do not constitute a community spatially limited, nor constitute a clearly identified “ethnic enclave” in NYC, ethnographic mapping (geographical

and social) led me to identify the diverse Argentine's profile in the city, including the different composition of ethnic organizations and professional groups.

2. In-depth interviews often become a sort of therapeutic catharsis, through which the private turns into meaningful public social experiences, worth of being reproduced and translated into others' (the ethnographer's) words (see Behar, 1993; Spivak, 1988).

3. As it happens with most ethnographic research, there was no financial compensation provided to study participants, and their willingness to collaborate with the project was based on their own time and initiative. While paying informants contributes to clarify the terms of social transactions, it may also hinder the construction (and maintenance) of trust as based on interpersonal exchanges. Monetary payments can lead participants to lie about themselves just to get into the study sample (see Goldstein, Spunt, Miller, & Bellucci, 1990).

4. The need for a categorical cessation of time through departure, it is within the mere nature of fieldwork that, sooner or later, will bring the ethnographic encounters to a closure (Crapanzano, 1980). "The ethnographic encounter, like any encounter, however distorted in its immediacy or through time, never ends. It continually demands interpretation and accommodation." "The sadness, the guilt, the feelings of solitude, and the love that come with departure and death will not, cannot, end" (Crapanzano, 1980, p. 140).

5. As Ortner (1995) noted, "the ethnographic stance (as we may call it) is as much an intellectual (and moral) positional, a constructive and interpretive mode, as it is a bodily process in space and time" (p. 173).

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