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Observer on the Move: Shadowing  
Ethnography of Ethnic Flexibility in NYC\*



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## Abstract

I will present an analysis of mobile shadowing ethnography, a research approach that dynamically engages body, mind, and sensibilities in research on how ethnicity is lived and performed in one of the world's most diverse locales: NYC. During fifteen months of fieldwork throughout NYC, I shadowed eleven Latinos as they invoked multiple ethnicities. Walking with them, I came to know NYC as a system of neighborhoods, socioeconomic regions, networks of relationships, and a series of encounters. Each participant served as my guide to NYC as I explored how their ethnic identities were shaped by multiple modes of difference. I argue that moving in and through a city's spaces – physical, socio-cultural, and interactional – sharpens the researcher's sensibilities to local manifestations of continuity, change, and complexity that is spurred by globalization. I discuss the advantages of the shadowing ethnographic approach for studying how intense diversity is experienced and negotiated in everyday city life. I further point to some of the ways that life in diverse urban places shape the development of ethnic flexibility.

## Author

ROSALYN NEGRÓN is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Broadly, Rosalyn's work deals with the interpersonal dimensions of ethnicity in diverse cities, with a special focus on social interaction and social networks. With applications to health, communication, and immigration policy, Rosalyn's work bridges multiple substantive and methodological areas, including social network analysis, health disparities research, and ethnic and racial minority STEM participation. She has conducted fieldwork in Jamaica, Florida, New York City, and Boston.



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## Introduction

Studying how people flexibly use multiple ethnic identifications in their daily lives poses a number of methodological challenges. This relates in part to the fact that ethnic invocations often occur unselfconsciously. I may think I observed an instance of ethnic identification only to learn that my informant had little awareness or explanation for the act. But even when ethnicity is invoked consciously, it is quite frequently not spoken out loud but hinted at and alluded to. The performance of ethnicity is a highly personalized and personal practice, one in which sometimes the research observer cannot join in. It is a practice that often happens on the move, as people circulate within and between highly diverse networks of relationships. How do researchers determine which of several social identities or ethnic categories is invoked in communication? How is ethnicity made relevant in an interaction? What are the effects of ethnic identity performance on the course of a conversation or on relationships, both fleeting and lasting? What role does the socio-spatial context play in ethnic identification?

With regard to movement across diverse spaces (social and physical), another set of challenges relates to tracing the connections between the urban geography and the everyday negotiations of ethnic identity. I propose that daily practice in superdiverse (Vertovec 2007) places like New York City (NYC), where this research was set, shape people's social networks and in turn the development of flexible identities or ethnic flexibility. Further, *being* and *doing* in spaces where diversity is densely written into multiple domains of public life – of the like that engages the five senses – places unique demands on the researcher who must negotiate various roles and engage with multiple analytical dimensions.

Such issues point to the need for methodologies that go beyond the standard survey or interview approach for studying ethnic identity negotiation (Keefe 1992). Waters (1990) argues that while census data supports the notion that ethnic identity continues to be a salient form of self-identification, it is not clear what the significance of these identities are to the individual, how and why people choose among several ethnic options, and how ethnicity is used in everyday life. This suggests that long-term ethnographic research that captures the process of contextual ethnic self-identification in various natural social contexts is an ideal approach for the study of ethnicity today.

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In this paper I share my experiences studying ethnic identification switching among New York City Latinos. Given the methodological challenges of the project, I designed a research process that involved me shadowing and audio recording eleven Latino informants as they went about their daily lives. Aiming to capture naturally occurring instances of identification switching across different contexts, I accompanied the women and men in a range of social settings, including work, school, church, family gatherings, and even dental appointments and dates. While I participated in many of their activities, I often continuously monitored in the hopes of witnessing subtle and sometimes fleeting presentations of ethnicity. Shadowing entailed constantly shifting research roles: between direct observer, participant observer, and sometimes, unobtrusive observer. But just as informants negotiated their ethnicity in New York City's diverse ethnic milieu, so too did my observations demand my own ethnic negotiations as I moved with my informants throughout the city.

Quinlan's (2008) description of shadowing is apt – "conspicuous invisibility". Conspicuous invisibility highlights the ways that shadowing observers must constantly negotiate distance and engagement with their research companions. In what follows, I will discuss the unique opportunities and challenges associated with this sort of observation. Distance/detachment made it possible to closely and continuously attend to note-taking and close observation right as informants were 'doing being ethnic'. Participation/engagement, on the hand, was an inevitable and welcome aspect of being 'close and personal' with informants for a week. In writing about the seeming paradox of participant observation, Benjamin Paul (1953: 69) wrote: "Participation implies emotional involvement; observation requires detachment. It is a strain to sympathize with others and at the same time strive for scientific objectivity." As I will show, shadowing ethnography actually involves a certain level of empathetic engagement, as moving in diverse urban spaces with my informants transformed my sensibilities and heightened my awareness of the ways that life amidst diversity has a number of unique effects on one's subjectivity.

My observations and conversations with – mostly Latino – New Yorkers pointed to a number of themes about diversity's effects: 1) diversity as freeing, particularly for immigrants who came from countries that were relatively less diverse, and in which various sorts of idiosyncrasies could more easily stand out, 2) diversity as a laboratory in which learning and experimentation with multiple cultures takes place through dabbling in different foods and languages, 3) diverse spaces as portals (both figuratively and in the sense of facilitating remittances, communication, and travel) to the familiarity of (multiple) home country environments, and also 4) diversity



as cultivating certain cognitive and communicative skills, of the sort needed to cut through the complexity, to identify and read cues into peoples backgrounds, in order to know if and how to orient to others.

In fact, diversity had many of the same effects on me as the researcher and observer. I was sometimes overwhelmed by the difficulties in recording it all, capturing the various layers in which diversity manifests itself, in order to better understand its impact on ethnic identity and interaction. And I became aware of the ways that the task of observing and describing diversity had important impacts on my own cognition, behavior, and my understanding of myself.

## The Study

At the center of my work is an enduring interest in the conditions and consequences of ethnic and cultural diversity, particularly in urban settings. During fieldwork in NYC I have examined how NYC Latinos invoke multiple ethnic identities in their daily interactions (Negrón 2011). My work illuminates processes of ethnic identity formation in urban contexts, while highlighting the role of *ethnic flexibility* in contemporary social relations. I define ethnic flexibility as a set of skills and cognitive orientations that enable people to shift between multiple ethnic identifications. Ethnic flexibility can entail an automatic shift between multiple contextually appropriate frames of reference (*cross-cultural fluency*). It can also involve the willful use of categories and markers, as manifested through *linguistic flexibility*. Along with these I consider the ways that racialized phenotypes and ethnically ambiguous personal image enable or constrain ethnic flexibility. I am interested in examining, at the micro-level of social interaction and self-presentation, the various techniques, tactics, and knowledges that people draw on to negotiate ethnic and cultural boundaries in the city, sometimes ratifying and at other times subverting ethnic and racial categories.

Over the course of six months, I shadowed eleven Latinos, a mix of first and second generation immigrants who hailed from: Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. My research centered on two of the most ethnically diverse communities in NYC: Astoria and Jackson Heights/Corona. The six-month period was the first phase of a larger study that examined the contexts and ways in which NYC Latinos switched their

ethnic self-identifications. To correctly identify instances of ethnic self-identification, I accompanied the men and women for one week each, in a variety of daily routines and observed and audio-recorded their verbal interactions for six to eight hours a day.

Observations began on the day after each of the informants completed an initial set of interviews. From the start, participants responded to this process with fascination. Yet some were periodically reluctant and embarrassed to admit to others that they were research participants and would actually integrate me more into their daily routines as a “friend” to lessen the awkward distance between us. Regardless of the level of fascination or embarrassment felt by each participant, the continuous monitoring of these busy urban men and women alternated between the tediously rote and exhausting, to the deeply moving and exciting. A small notebook was ever present during the observations.

Actually, the most uncomfortable aspect of the observations was the digital audio recorders that they I had to wear. I selected small (4” x 1 ½”), high-end, lightweight recorders that fit into cell phone cases. These cases were clipped on to their pant waists or pockets. Remote control clip-on mics were attached to the recorders. Participants usually clipped the mics to their shirt pockets, collars or lapels. The remote control feature on the microphones was invaluable to the respondents. All became adept at pausing or stopping recordings on the fly; for example, during trips to the bathroom, when requiring privacy, or during silent moments of activity not discernable via audio. However, a consequence of having these recorders on for hours at a time over a two-week period was that it remained on, unnoticed and forgotten, even during bathroom trips, idle points and extremely frank conversations (e.g. with me as the subject matter).

My original plan was to observe participants for seven straight days (5-8 hours each day) in the first week and let them free with the recorders in the second week. However, it did not always work out this way. This was especially because informants had at least one day in which it would be impractical for me to be present: days that involved lots of resting at home, off-limit work areas, or romantic dates. Instead, I asked that they let me observe for 6 days, at least 5 of them in sequence, with the option to reserve one day of observation for a later date.

## Methodology

In essence, I conducted shadowing, mobile urban ethnography, an approach that dynamically engages body, mind, and sensibilities in research on how ethnicity is lived and performed in the city. My body was engaged through the physical acts of walking, following and catching up with my informants as I walked in their footsteps; in the tugging, pushing, and brushing against in the density of people who made their way to the streets. Sound was also implicated in the physical experience of the diverse spaces where we walked and drove. I became attuned to the experience of hearing multiple languages, which came and went the way that voices tune in and out when one searches through radio stations. I would make it something of an exercise to count what languages I could distinguish, as a way to index the ethno-cultural diversity of whatever place I happened to be in. And also there was the music. In the summer when I conducted many of my observations, *reggaeton* was ubiquitous in the streets of Queens. It was a global, homogenizing element, given how widely it was listened to by Latino youth of various nationalities. Finally, my mind was engaged by the constant need to hold multiple levels of observation: the conversations/interactions, the spaces/places and their characteristics, the inhabitants of the spaces, and so on. Erlandson, et al.'s (1993) conception of observation as a “written photograph” is apt. Such a rendering does indeed include description based on the five senses.

## Layers

How to organize it all? In my post hoc reflection and analysis of my fieldwork experience, I have found it useful to first isolate the various layers that compose the diverse urban scene. One layer includes the physical space. For example, in Jackson Heights along Roosevelt Avenue, over which passes the so-called “immigrant express” train, there is a great density of commercial venues, many of them being sites for transnational transactions. These buildings are often saturated with bilingual marketing posters, flags of many nations, and signs of business names that communicate the national origins and orientations of its owners. These physical signs show the various ways that immigrants mark the space as theirs. In diverse places like Jackson Heights, multiple groups “make place” like this, with a distinct, vivid and textured effect on the physical appearance of the surroundings.



**Figure 1.** Along Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, Queens

Then there's the sensory layer, which attunes the observer to the savory smells of a range of different types of cuisine or the heady incense used for rituals. I have already described the aural dimension of this layer. The sensory layer combined with the physical appearance of the superdiverse neighborhood like Jackson Heights, has the effect of being transported to places abroad. This is how my Queens interlocutors described Jackson Heights and adjacent neighborhoods along Roosevelt Avenue: suddenly you find yourself in Mexico or Ecuador or India or Korea, depending on where along the 7 train line one is. There is also a dynamic, corporeal layer that registers the movement, bustle, and energy of the diverse urban space. And of course, there is the layer where human interaction takes place, in all its clustering and cross-cutting ways. Here, one also notes a person's appearance, he/her dress, the language he/she speaks, who he/she is with; in order to gather clues about his/her ethnicity and his/her relationship to the place (is he/she a resident, a tourist, a business owner?). In noting these details one can also document the ways that particular groups of people occupy space in ways that impose a certain logic on diversity, according to boundaries imposed by class or race, or linguistic and religious distinctions that both enable and constrain interaction. During an observation at a park in Astoria Queens, I wrote:

It is 4:07pm and the two women who sat to my right with a stroller have left. The side of the park where I'm in is where the Latinas sit. In the middle is an area with the statue where the skateboarders practice and a diverse group of kids run around. Behind me and to the right of the middle area sit several clusters of women who wear hijabs (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Egyptian?). These clusters also include several baby strollers and as with the Latinas, the women talk casually among themselves in their respective languages. They then get up and make their way home. So then we have two sides of the park. One to the left of the statue, where the benches are occupied mostly by Latinas, and an area to the right where the Muslim women sit. In the middle are kids from both sides.

As I moved with my NYC informants, I experienced each of my informants' micro-worlds. These micro-worlds consisted of unique configurations of actors, and the physical, sensory, interactional factors to which my observation had to attend.

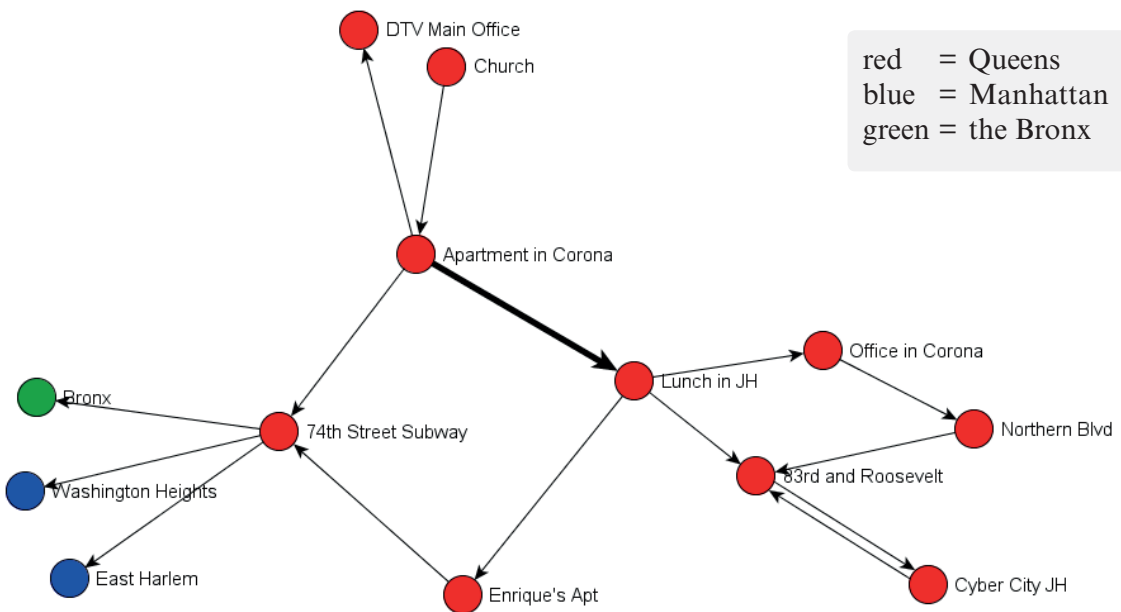
## Multiple micro-worlds

Moving with my informants, whether on foot, by subway or by car, engaged me with an expansive setting in which all sorts of cultural practices and patterns of social interaction unfolded. Each of the participants who I shadowed was my guide to the city, or "their" city. Shadowing is an excellent way to ethnograph the city because of the ways that it allows you to delve into multiple micro-worlds. Given the multiplicity of NYC's spaces and places, a foothold in these micro-worlds is critical to an understanding of the massive city more wholly. In this research, I got to know NYC as a system of neighborhoods, socioeconomic regions, and series of encounters. I was not embedded in one neighborhood or community in which to build localized relationships. I did not wake up every morning in a neighborhood where its residents would be subjects for my research. I commuted to them, and in turn each woman and man served as my guides to the city. Walking conspicuously and invisibly, I came to know NYC as a system of neighborhoods, socioeconomic regions, clusters of interaction, and series of encounters. With each, I explored a different aspect of NYC and its streets, a different network of relationships, different places, different socioeconomic experiences, different uniquely urban activities – distinct individual NYC worlds. I did not embed myself in their communities. Rather, I was embedded in my companions' social networks and daily routines. Therefore, just as I vacillated between engagement and detachment when observing my informants, so too did my experience of the city shift between my feeling like a part of it



– one of its deeply committed dwellers – and at other times my being a wandering visitor.

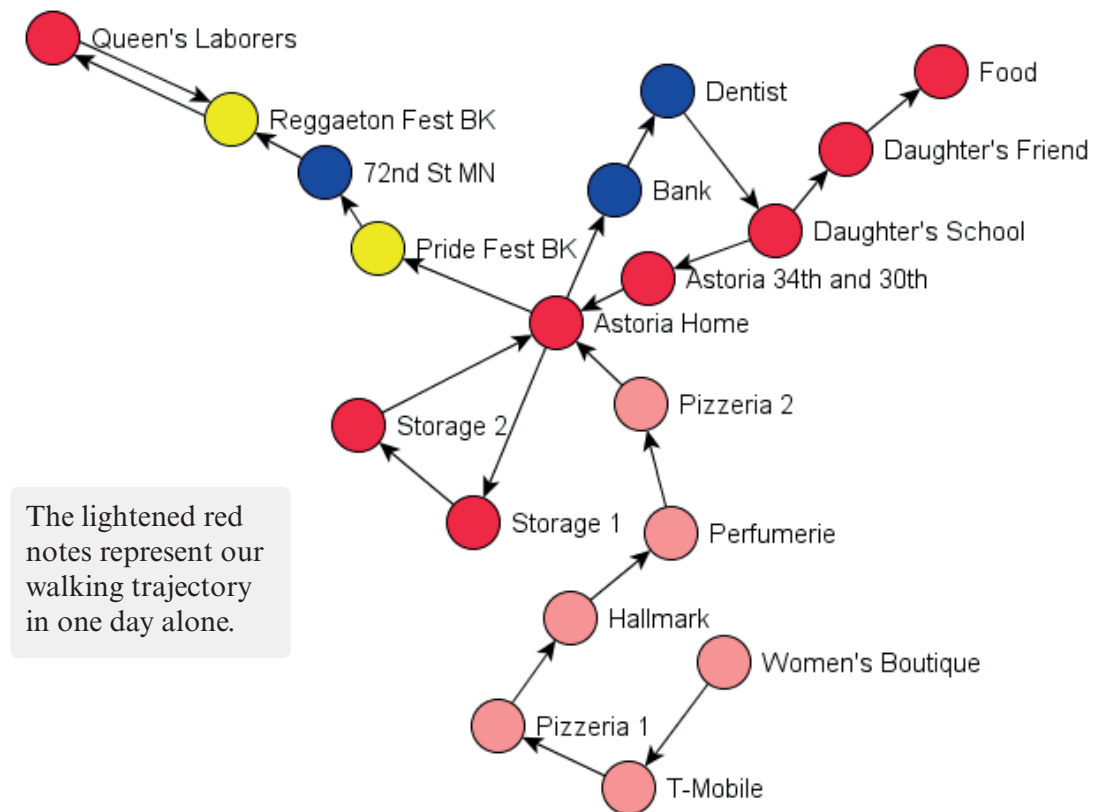
Figure 2 (NYC boroughs designated by the node color) represents the network of places to which I traveled with Abel, an Ecuadorian street salesman living in Corona Queens. My observations of Abel's daily routines were centered in Jackson Heights, where he often met his fellow salesmen for breakfast or lunch before setting up his makeshift satellite TV sales stand along Roosevelt Avenue and 83rd Street. His daily comings and goings were mostly routinized and he frequented many of the same sorts of places within a two-mile radius in busy Jackson Heights. He interacted with Latinos of many nationalities but especially Ecuadorian and Colombian, reflective of the demography of the neighborhood. Work-related matters tended to be the locus of his interactions, and he was most comfortable communicating in Spanish. Abel possessed Latino-oriented ethnic flexibility skills with which he negotiated multiple dialects of Spanish, cultural knowledge of multiple Latino sub-groups, and even attempted to pass as a Colombian.



**Figure 2.** The trajectories during five days of observation with an Ecuadorian street salesman

Roberto's NYC micro-world, on the other hand, was more dispersed and irregular on a day-to-day basis (Figure 4). He moved where business opportunities presented themselves. During observations, we traveled on foot and by car, along a chain of destinations in Queens, Manhattan, and Brooklyn. I accompanied Roberto on trips

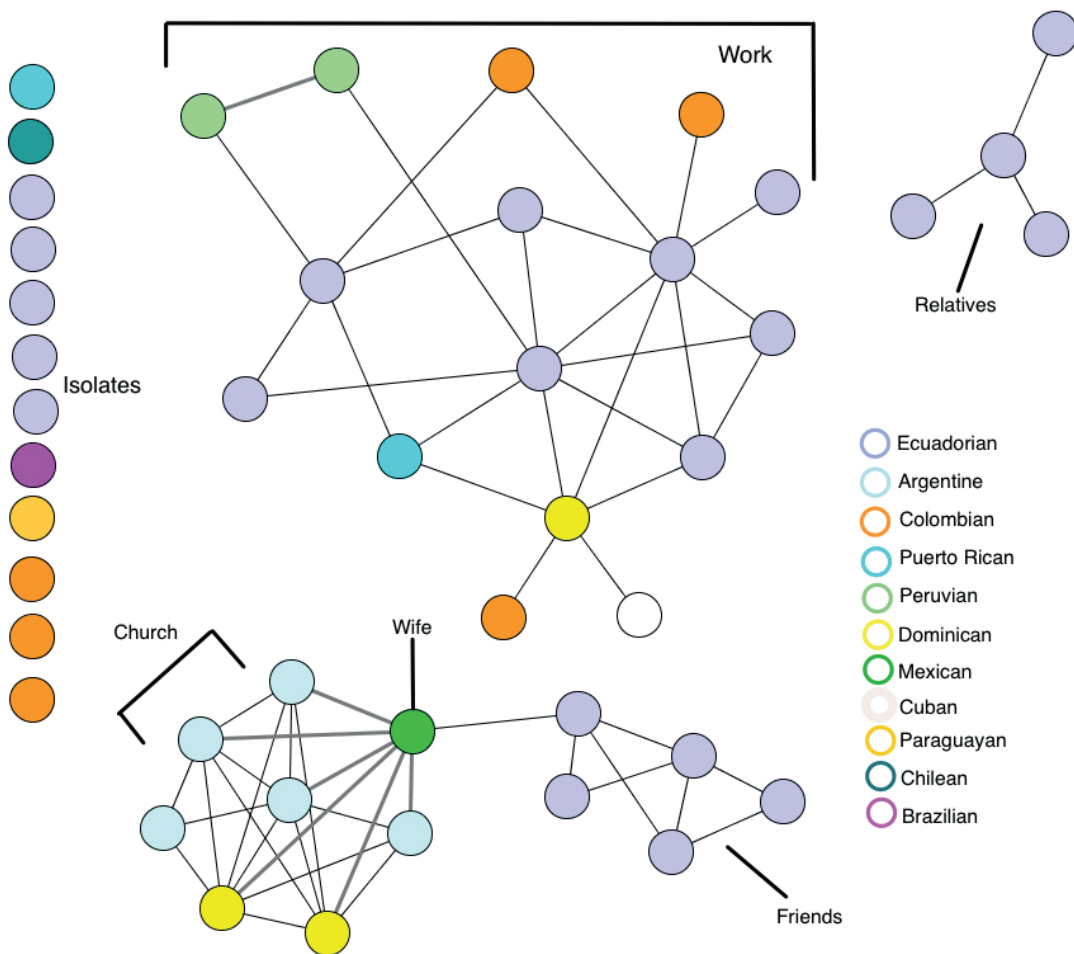
to promote his street fair equipment rental business, to run errands, and to set up canopies for clients who rented them. The success of his business hinged on his ability to communicate effectively with business owners throughout the city who came from a range of backgrounds.



**Figure 3.** The trajectories during five days of observation with a Venezuelan-American entrepreneur

A comparison of both trajectories suggests some key similarities, pointing to parallel experiences with regard to work activities and geographical preferences and constraints and broader structural arrangements. Both men spent a majority of their time in Queens, with much of their personal, social, and professional needs met by the people and resources available in the borough. While not boldly represented in the visualization of their trajectories, both men also shared undocumented immigrant status, which posed certain limits on work opportunities. Upon closer inspection however, we can see the significance of concept of a micro-world – consisting of unique configurations of relationships, contrasting immigrant experiences, different ethno-national orientations, and socio-economic arrangements – for our understanding of ethnicity.

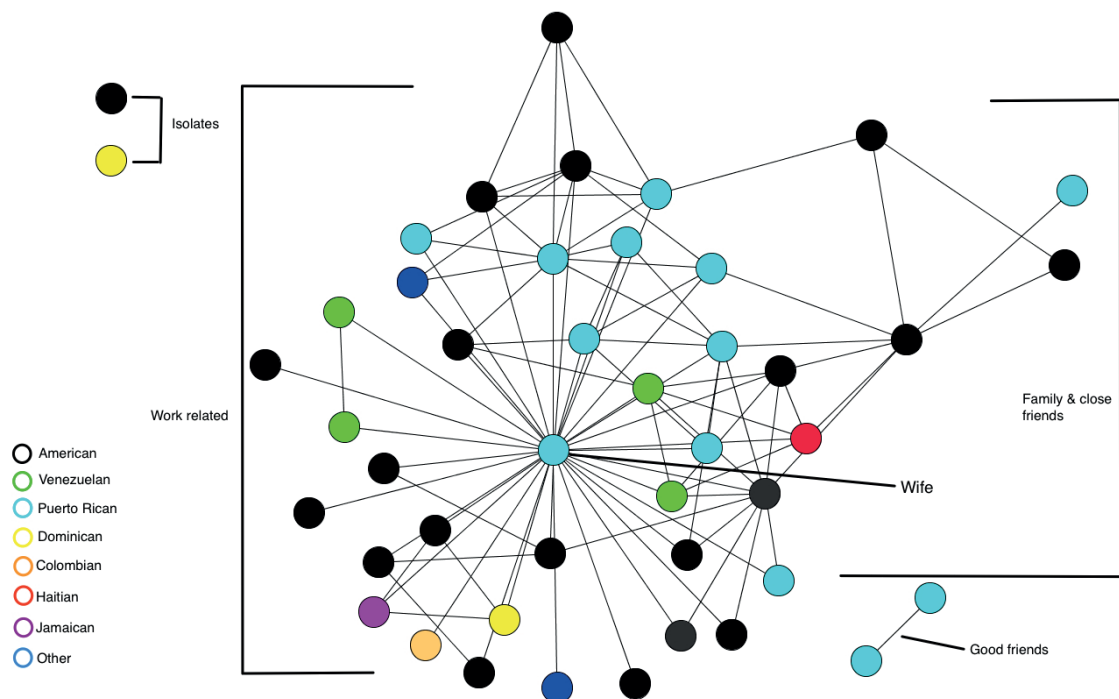
Abel's was a distinctly (and highly diverse) Latino social world, that included sales activities in Latino neighborhoods in Queens, Manhattan, and the Bronx. These experiences are further mapped on his social network (Figure 4), which included several people that I met during observations. Abel's social network reflects the ways he was embedded in the Jackson Heights neighborhood where he spent most of his time. His primary contacts were Latino, including his Mexican wife, with the dominant presence of Ecuadorian compatriots.



**Figure 4.** Abel's personal social network

In contrast to Abel, in our walks together, and in his daily life, Roberto encountered people from a greater diversity of socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Roberto was a person with an exceptional penchant for ethnic flexibility. Bilingual and multi-dialectal, the Venezuelan-born resident of Astoria, Queens had lived in the U.S. for most of his life.





**Figure 5.** Roberto's personal social network

As his social network shows (Figure 5), he had forged relationships with people from a range of backgrounds, including a multi-ethnic wife of Puerto Rican and African American descent. In contrast to Abel, his co-nationals were a small minority of his network. Instead, his network was primarily composed of people of Euro-American and Puerto Rican descent. As I traveled with him on his various runs, I observed as he shifted his ethnic identification to bring it more in line with the identities of his interlocutors and consonant with the broader socio-spatial contexts that he found himself in.

Both men were expert at invoking multiple ethnicities across contexts, but their ethnolinguistic repertoires differed in ways that can be traced in their daily activities and social networks. Abel's linguistic flexibility, for example, was bounded by the limits of his English proficiency, but he could take on and understand multiple dialects of Spanish. Roberto's own linguistic flexibility included multiple dialects of English and Spanish. Their language abilities opened up distinct possibilities – with both social and economic implications – for the development of relationships, and their levels of engagement with the broader NYC landscape.

As an observer, the distances I traveled – not merely in terms of physical space, but also the distance that separated the experiences of the two men – struck me. Both were Latinos, both lived in Queens, both were immigrants, and both were men. Yet, in many respects there was little convergence in the paths they followed, the networks they shaped, and the slices of diversity they each negotiated. With interviews alone I would not have been able to appreciate the myriad ways that urban diversity coalesces around individuals. To this, the observer must attend.

## Conclusions

The various NYC micro-worlds that I sampled during observation sharpened my sensibilities to continuity, change, and complexity – even in the most quotidian experiences. The shadowing observations of these busy urban men and women alternated between the tediously rote and exhausting, to the deeply moving and exciting. My approach attended to the routine and the mundane contexts in which ethnicity manifests. Such an ethnography of the everyday practice of ethnicity was especially revealing in those highly diverse neighborhoods where I observed, which on the surface, seemed everything *but* routine, even exotic. Much of the fieldwork was highly mobile, with many moments in which my body, mind, and sensibilities were dynamically engaged in Queen’s diverse urban geography. While my focus was on the way that ethnicity is lived and performed in the city, wandering through NYC alongside my research guides helped me create a dynamic mental image of the ways that global processes take place on the ground in one of the world’s most diverse locales.

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