



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

PORTFOLIO

Way(s) We Remember: Mexican Kinships, Intersubjective Storytelling, and Thinking and Feeling Through Comics

José Sherwood González

The University of Manchester
j.sherwood.gonzalez@gmail.com

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 43, No 2 (2022), pp. 79-101

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2022.386



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

PORTFOLIO

Way(s) We Remember: Mexican Kinships, Intersubjective Storytelling and Thinking and Feeling Through Comics

José Sherwood González

The University of Manchester
j.sherwood.gonzalez@gmail.com



Figure 1: Chucho and Manuela sitting in the family garden. Courtesy: Rafael Gonzalez Melendrez, circa 1980s

Road Map

Born respectively in 1907 and 1910, my great-grandparents Chucho and Manuela were the pillars of the González family. They had four children, Toni, Chuy, Tita and my Abuelito,¹ all of whom, minus one, had children of their own. Their children include my aunts, my uncles, and my mother who then ended up having me. My great-grandparents used to tell many stories to their grandchildren who shared these stories long after Chucho and Manuela were gone. In this portfolio, I talk about my journey into the stories about my great-grandparents Chucho and Manuela and the multiple ways in which my family remembers them. In the first section, “If Not Now, When? If Not Me, Who?” I explain how, in 2014, the sense of urgency to conserve our family’s legacy made me decide to produce a documentary film on the

stories about my great-grandparents and record individual interviews with the living members of the González family who wanted to share their memories. In “*Telefono Descompuesto*” I describe how I intended to create an intersubjective study of the multiple ways my family remembers Chucho and Manuela, but had to search for alternate methods to documentary filmmaking because stories within the film edit caused conflict in the family. In “*Mexican Visuality: Tezcatlipoca and Visual Cultures of Uncertainty*,” I trace a line between Mexican oral tradition and Mexican visual culture as a way to navigate uncertainty. In “*Thinking and Feeling Through Comics*,” I discuss how this interconnection inspired the use of graphic modes of ethnography such as comics and illustration that could evoke the intersubjective intentions of the project as originally intended in the documentary film. This resulted in me drawing a graphic ethnography called *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019a)² to effectively navigate the ways in which we remember those who are no longer with us.

Throughout the portfolio, I have included images from the comic as well as transcribed excerpts translated from Spanish to English from the unreleased documentary film. These textual excerpts are formatted as film scripts and include information such as when and where the extract was recorded and who is speaking, with some storytellers being anonymised where necessary. The multimodal approach of this portfolio section expresses the interpersonal nature of storytelling encountered in the family setting and evokes the multiple temporalities and perceptions at work in (the making of) this piece.

If Not Now, When? If Not Me, Who?



Figure 2: First comic I drew about the project, containing a summary of its genealogy. Courtesy: José Sherwood González, 2019

The first time I heard the stories about my Mexican great-grandfather Chucho was in early January 2014 in Llandudno, Wales. My mother was driving my brother, my partner, and I back home from the cinema after having watched Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013). She mentioned that the people picking

cotton in the movie reminded her of a photograph she had seen many years ago of her great-grandparents picking cotton in the USA. I was really shocked to hear this. I was born in the UK and grew up in North Wales but have Mexican nationality. Since I was a child, I was obsessed with Mexico, my Mexican identity, and my family. Why had I not heard this story before?

Once my mother started telling me the anecdote about Chucho, many other stories about him came to surface: the story about Chucho crossing into the United States with his grandparents when he was young in search of his brother who was really his uncle Julio; or the one where when his boss at the automotive-manufacturing plant asked if there were any Native Americans, he said that he was Sioux and, because he spoke Spanish and English and got on well with the Indigenous, Mexican, and American folk, he got the job. She also told me the epic fable of how he returned from Chicago to Guanajuato in a Ford Model T motor car by the side of the rail tracks before there were any roads; she told me the story of when he eloped with Manuela, the primary school teacher,³ and of when he worked as a sound engineer during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. She said that she remembered Chucho very fondly, and she could remember a lot about him but if I really wanted to know more, I would have to talk to my Great-Aunt Tita in Mexico. I soon realised that if my mother knew these stories, there must be others who also had stories. I started to wonder who knew which anecdote and how they remembered Chucho. With that realisation came an immense sense of urgency to record these narratives before they were forgotten.

Oral tradition has been recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as an “intangible cultural heritage” (Alivizatou 2007), a fund of knowledge or cultural resource that serves to build family bonds, values, and identity. Chucho and Manuela are the roots of our family life in Mexico City; we are ‘here’ because they were ‘there’ (Patel 2021). However, I was either not yet alive or too young to be able to take the opportunity to ask my great-grandparents their life stories from their own perspective; I had only seen the traces they had left behind (see Figure 3) so I asked the people that remembered them.



Figure 3: One of the last panels in *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* which is filled with symbolisms linked to the tragic myth of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl. Chucho and Manuela are buried in view of these volcanoes

I decided that when I was visiting my family in Mexico over the summer, I would interview and record everyone who wanted to share what they knew about Chucho and the way they remembered him. Writing about historical fiction, Hillary Mantel (2017) argues: “As soon as we die, we enter into fiction. Just ask two different family members to tell you about someone recently gone, and you will see what I mean.” I understood this to mean that the forging of memories and the making of history are processes that are subject to misinterpretations. Thus, I was fascinated by the absurd and almost quixotic endeavour to record the intersubjective stories as narrated by my great-grandparents. As Johannes Fabian argues, intersubjectivity is linked to phenomenology; it is “a nonpositivist conception of objectivity” (2014, 203). In anthropology, “ethnographic objectivity is intersubjective objectivity” (Fabian 2014, 203), a way of bringing together multiple lifeworlds and seeing what new kinds of knowledge can be produced through less hierarchical relationships. I was incredibly interested in the impossibility of any notion of a ‘true’ version and resided in the idea that I would record any and everybody’s version of the stories about Chucho and Manuela as they remembered them.

The following is an audio clip recorded during the aforementioned car journey (see Figure 2); I have included the transcript:

EXT. CAR - LATE NIGHT
[After12yearsaslaveMum.wav](#)

JOSÉ

Well, it’s just it would be a pity if the story was lost, you know?

SILVIA

I know, I think we need to keep notes of you know places and things like that.

JOSÉ

I don’t know, maybe everyone knows a different part of the story and...

SILVIA

It’s true, I think it’s true.

JOSÉ

I could interview them...

SILVIA

Well you could do that this summer.

JOSÉ

Yeah, I really think I will.

SILVIA

Even just because it’s part of your story as well.

After the epiphany I had in the car ride with my mother in January, I started preparing for my trip to my family in Mexico in the summer of 2014. I taught myself the basic steps of how to record film using a Sony A58 DSLR camera (with various lenses and a tripod) and audio using a Zoom H1 digital sound recorder with a handmade deadcat fabricated from lining made from a coat. I also selected 23 photos from the photographs my mother had brought to the UK with her, and I printed them onto seven pages for when I was interviewing the family (see Figure 4). Although I was unaware of the photo-elicitation

method, I certainly felt that this prompt might help support the interviewing process. Elizabeth Edwards (2005) argues that photographs are relational objects that go beyond the visual by articulating histories that are entangled within sensory and social relationships. I realised from the beginning that looking at these photos with my family would work in contrast to a formal interview precisely because of our familiarity, “thus enabling knowledge to be passed down, validated, absorbed and refigured in the present” (2005, 39). The benefit of the photo elicitation method is that it cedes authority to a storyteller with access to knowledge as well as the photographs and the stories embedded within them.

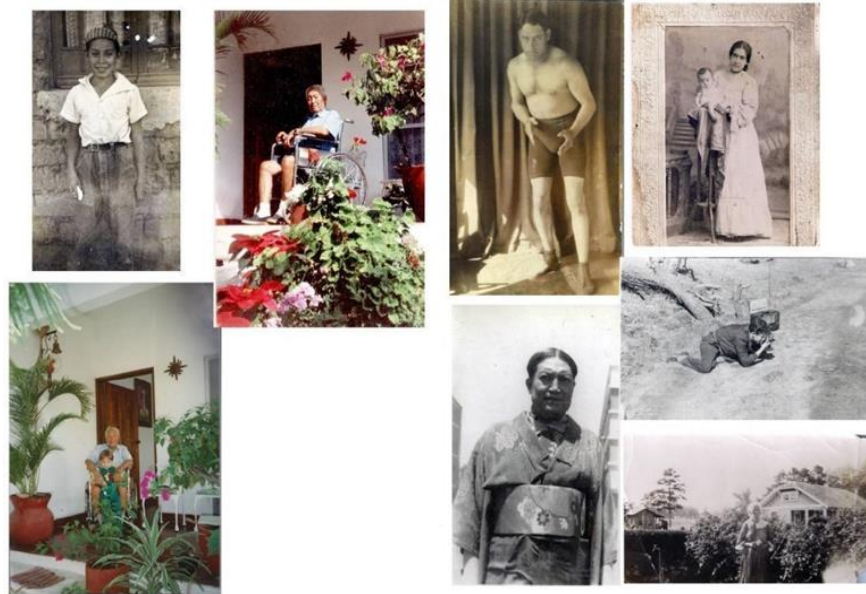


Figure 4: A page from the photographic printouts shared with my family during the interviews in 2014. They include photographs of Chucho, Uncle Julio and la Abuela Julia. Courtesy: Silvia Gonzalez, 2014

The process of setting up the cameras, recording the interviews, and allowing stories to emerge through the interviewing process was an incredibly rewarding experience. Every family member that agreed to share their stories was very excited to take part, and some of my uncles even admitted that they had meant to record Chucho’s stories but had never got around to it (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019a, 21). My great-aunt was able to clarify much of what mother had told me and could also add a lot of details that others did not know. Below is a conversation I had with my great-aunt Tita about the difference between her version of events in comparison to others.

INT. BEDROOM – EVENING
Tita 17.08.14 ZOOM0002.wav⁴

TITA

I tell this story to you because one of these days, I will no longer exist and so you can see.

JOSÉ

That is why I am making this documentary. I’m scared that once you and Abuelito are no longer here...

TITA

Everything is over because everyone might know the story because they heard it, but they never saw it.

Generally, the rest of the family respected how my great-aunt Tita and my grandfather interpreted events. For example, when the family is all together sharing stories, Tita is quick to interrupt and say “No, that’s not how it happened” and correct the version according to how she sees it (see Figure 5). That being said, I also encountered many discrepancies (which I had expected) and also direct contradictions to other versions of stories that they offered. Due to our familial ties, we had the privilege of taking our time to allow for narratives to emerge over the course of days, sometimes weeks. This allowed some storytellers, particularly my great-aunt, to circle back to stories and I could interview different people and then fact-check with my great-aunt.



Figure 5: “No, that’s not how it happened” – what my great-aunt said when I fact-checked a story about her great grandfather Justo (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019, 5)

Teléfono Descompuesto

As a time-based medium, film and film editing is a subjective process of selection and montage; layering film and audio elements one after another in order to compress time. My decision to use film was with the aim to acknowledge the simultaneous and equivalent existence of multiple perspectives. This was because I was very aware of my position as the editor of the film, and the process of editing became a way of de-centering my position as author in order to allow each storyteller’s perspective to have its time and space within the film, without forcing any biases upon them and their stories (Anderson 2014; Keating and Merenda 2013).

In anthropology, reflexivity refers to the researcher’s attempt to subvert “the idea of the observer as impersonal machine” (Okely and Callaway 1992, 23) and demonstrates the “self and category whom the others confronted, received and confided in” (23). In this sense, my aim was to intentionally mediate my subjectivity as author through a multiplicity of voices. Therefore, I explicitly encouraged each of my family members to individually tell the stories the way they remembered them to promote the interdependent nature of the stories told about Chucho and Manuela. The idea was to reflect on my own position in relation to my family, allowing for further deep descriptions to be drawn out by other members of the family. In this sense, the documentary would become a tool for remembering.

My most profound inspiration for experimenting with this reflexive style of storytelling was Sarah Polley’s autobiographical documentary film *Stories We Tell* (2012) which investigates the truth about Polley’s family history in Canada. Polley’s documentary film is plural, polyvocal, and collaborative in the sense that her search to learn the ‘truth’ about her mother is mediated through a medley of family

storytellers or a diverse chorus of many voices (Anderst 2013). During *Stories We Tell*, Polley compares the process in which her family tells stories to the Rashomon effect; a storytelling phenomenon first highlighted in Akira Kurosawa's (1950) *Rashomon* where each individual storyteller presents a contradictory version of the same incident. *Rashomon* presents the view that only a diverse multiplicity of perspectives can reveal truth.



Figure 6: An illustration of *teléfono descompuesto* in action as featured in the multimodal piece for *Trajectoria* (Sherwood González 2022). It conveys the multiplicity of stories about when Chucho punched the son of 'the second most important man' in Irapuato, Guanajuato

During the interviews, my family described these processes as resembling *teléfono descompuesto* (broken telephone) a game known as either 'Telephone' or 'Chinese whispers.' During *teléfono descompuesto*, players form a line or circle. One person comes up with a message and whispers it into the ear of the next person who repeats what they hear to the next who repeats it to the next and so on. When the last

player receives the message, they announce what they heard, and this message is compared with the original message. Although the aim of the game is to transmit the message as accurately as possible, along the way, the messages are inevitably disrupted (see Figure 6 and 12 for an illustrated example of this). The fun premise of the game comes from comparing the original with the final message. There are traits of this phenomenon in analogue and digital recording, as oral/aural information can be prone to noise-disrupted errors when transmitted to other receivers (Flusser 1990, 397). It is precisely this process of hearsay that fascinates me. As my great-aunt Tita said: "I heard this so now I tell you this. It might not be true, but this is what I heard."

In 2017, I produced an 8-minute short film which synthesised the multiple voices and narrative strands of the life stories of Chucho and Manuela. Much of the multiplicity I perceived in the stories when recording did not translate to the short film because it over-simplified the narrative complexity of Chucho and Manuela's memoirs. When I showed the film to members of my family in 2017, my aunts and uncles in my mother's generations seemed to understand my use of choral storytelling to represent the multiplicity of perspectives that people remember once a person dies. This was not the case for my grandfather who objected to how his father Chucho was represented, specifically objecting to the allusions of *maltrato* (abuse, specifically in the domestic setting) as discussed by some members of my family. Here is an excerpt of the 8-minute film that caused the trouble:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY, AFTERNOON & EVENING

***** 07.08.14 ZOOM0001.wav⁵

STORYTELLER

Yeah, he had a misogynistic streak and he did abuse my grandmother. My aunt disagrees with this, it's like she doesn't want to remember. It's something she denies, I believe. But it happened and it's part of the story and there is no reason why it should be denied. The only way to overcome all of these things is by looking at them, learning from them and understanding them in order to get over it all.

After I shared my work with my grandfather, he went very quiet, left and went to speak about this with his sister, my great-aunt. She called me immediately on the phone and told me how the film had saddened both her and her grandfather. To my surprise, she told me she refused to participate in the film and threatened to put anyone in jail that would seek to defame their father (see Figure 7). According to my great-aunt, I experienced three earthquakes before I left Mexico in 2017: an 8.1-magnitude on September 7th, a 7.1-magnitude on September 19th, and the phone call on November 5th from my great-aunt. Our problems have since been resolved because Tita and I soon forgave each other for our previous confrontation because I agreed to 'change' the story to her version of events.



Figure 7: The phone call with my great-aunt as featured in *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019, 18)

A few weeks after the phone call, my great-aunt, grandparents, my aunt, my uncle, my step-father, my mother, my partner and I went to watch *Coco* (Molina and Unkrich 2017) at the cinema, Disney Pixar's interpretation of Mexican celebrations of the Day of the Dead. The plot consists of the hero of the story, Miguel, searching through the underworld for a family member that would give him the blessing to be a musician, in spite of the fact his living (and dead) family are denying him the ability to express himself musically. Thematically, *Coco* breaks down intergenerational traumas and borders shared between latinx family members in a playful and emotive way. I remember at the end of the film, we were all in tears and kissing and hugging each other. It was an incredibly cathartic moment for myself and Tita and reconciliation both in the film's but also our reality. That being said, I did not know how to integrate many of the complex feelings I had around the seismic impact of my great-aunt's response to my work. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place: do I appease my great-aunt and prioritise her voice over everyone else's, in spite of the work I had already been cultivating around polyvocal storytelling?

Following this, it became clear to me that filmmaking had proved to be insufficient as a medium to express storytelling as a polyvocal and performative process. The process caused problems with my family precisely because it placed a mirror to the multiple interpretations of the more contentious stories that it neatly reflected, as I explain in the next section. Documentary filmmaking is a mode of engagement that evokes a deeper, more fragile fear for the filmmaker; an engagement with "the skull beneath the skin" (MacDougall 2005, 8). Indeed, my experience demonstrated that this is a sensitive and exposing process; some of these stories and the recording images felt too 'real'; a bit too 'close to the

bone.’ After the phone exchange with my great-aunt in 2017, I took a long break to search for methods that went beyond oral testimony and film that could create different opportunities for the ambivalent realities of my family stories within the context of Mexican intergenerational storytelling and the people who voice them. Expressing the sense of uncertainty I felt toward the stories about Chucho and Manuela involved experimentation with a number of methods: [sound](#), photobook and [film](#). I ended up choosing comics as a way to think through this persistent uncertainty and express multiple realities. The following section interprets aspects of my family’s stories within a broader context of Mesoamerican mythology and uncertainty within Mexican visual culture.

Mexican Visuality: Tezcatlipoca and Visual Cultures of Uncertainty



Figure 8 Exhibition of paintings by José Luis González Cedillo arranged for his annual day of the dead (*Día de los Muertos*), October/November 2017. Courtesy: José Sherwood González

Every *Día de los Muertos*, my Abuelito (my grandfather) presents an exhibition within an *ofrenda*⁶ in the foyer of his local theatre in Colonia Narvarte. Those days, copal incense peels the air and the room is filled with painted realms of Mexican imagery that operate as portals into other dimensions. Since the 1950s, my Abuelito has been painting volcanoes, *calaveras* and *catrinas*⁷ which can be associated with a specific way of visualising Mexican culture. As a young boy, it always frustrated me when my Abuelito would flip the question back to me when I asked him what his paintings meant. I must have asked him ad nauseam before he introduced me to Tezcatlipoca when I was staying with my family in 2014 with the intention of recording Chucho’s stories. Ascending then descending the two flights of stairs to his studio in his and my grandmother’s house, he returned with a gift for me: Paul Westheim’s book *La Calavera* (1983).

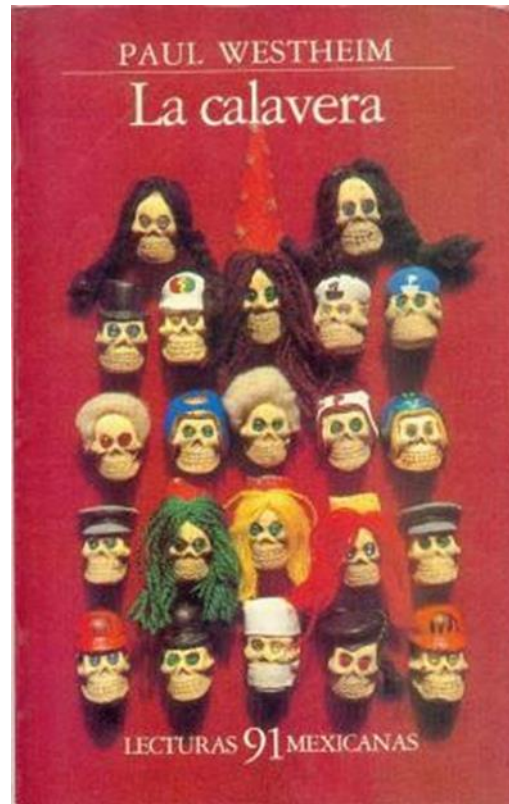


Figure 9: Cover of *La Calavera* (Westheim 1983)

Westheim (1983) posits that Tezcatlipoca is a way into understanding how contemporary Mexicans perceive art as a means of passing down a distinctly Mexican way of dealing with the uncertainty of life, death, and ancestral memory. Through this, Westheim creates a bridge between art history and archaeology as a way to make sense of the lived experience of contemporary Mexicans through visual culture. Elizabeth Baquedano associates Tezcatlipoca, the enigmatic Aztec trickster god and ‘Lord of the Smoking Mirror’ with the uncertainty of life and ancestral memory, a presence of absence, a shaman-like shadow that “crosses spatial and mythical boundaries with impunity” (2014, 2). Tezcatlipoca is characterised by an obsidian mirror (black volcanic glass) for a leg (Olivier 2015) which, if we are to believe ethno-historical sources, gave its owner perceptual “access to the intangible world of reflections, where souls, spirits, and the immanent forces of the cosmos dwell” (Baquedano 2014, 2); even seeing one’s reflection in the water, watching smoke rise from Popocatepetl volcano, or hearing echoes could all be signs of Tezcatlipoca in the world. Manifested as his animal counterpart, the jaguar, Tezcatlipoca is Tepeyollotl (‘Heart of the Mountain’): god of mountains, earthquakes, and echoes. Baquedano (2014) alludes to Tezcatlipoca’s ambiguous and chthonic association to the underworld as a route to understanding the interlocking and ambivalent complexities at play in “Aztec belief and social action across all levels of Late postclassic central Mexican culture” (5).

Centring around this anxiety of/for life, Tezcatlipoca manifests in all manner of creative and playful registers in Mexico. Take *ex votos* or *retablos*. A Mexican folk art typically painted on tin plates, votive paintings are a way of pictorially expressing stories that might otherwise have remained silent, such as stories of migration (Durand and Massey 1995; Giffords 1974). Other examples of manifestations of Tezcatlipoca include the sweet *calaveritas de amaranto* (amaranth candy skulls) that families place on *ofrendas* (offerings) for the day of the dead, mass reproductions of José Guadalupe Posada’s woodcut

and zinc-etched *grabados* of the iconic *Calavera Catrina*, the public state funding of Diego Rivera's murals such as *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (*Dream of a Sunday Afternoon at Alameda Central Park*), Dr Atl's painted testimonies of the birth of Parícutín volcano in 1943, Gabriel Figueroa's stunning cinematography of the Day of the Dead fairytale in *Macario* (1960) and Disney's *Coco* (Molina and Unkrich 2017). Figure 10, for example, is entirely inspired by my grandfather's artwork which is in dialogue with a distinctly versatile visual language regarding life, death, and tradition that broadly engages with a Mexican visuality that is related to the themes attributed to Mexico's Day of the Dead.

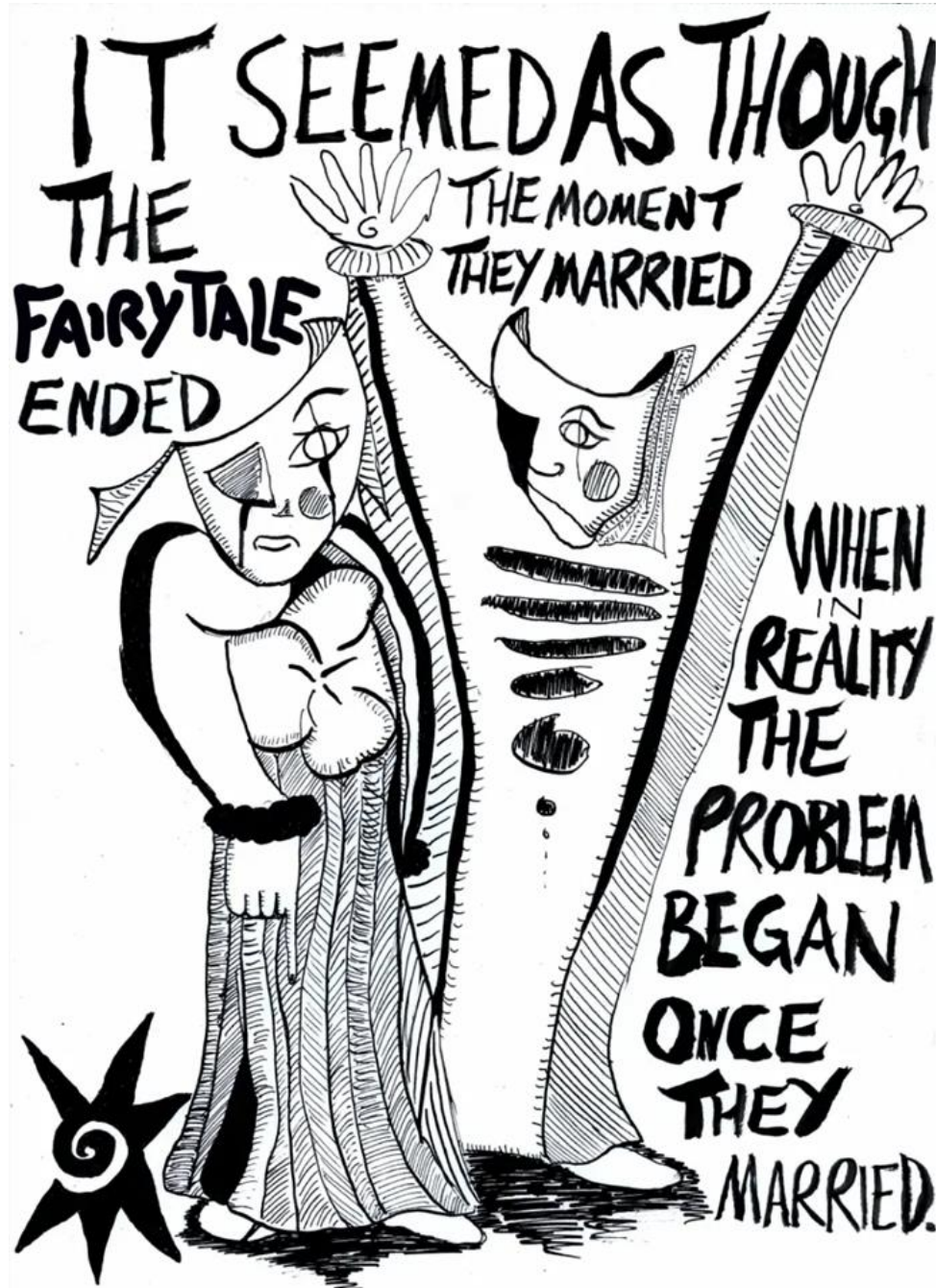


Figure 10: This drawing is inspired by my Abuelito's painting of two masked theatrical clowns (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019, 13)

Visuality does not necessarily pertain to vision in the sense of the capacity to register sensory impressions through the eye but rather to a bodily and performative mode of imagination: “an imaginary that is not the image of something else, but without which there cannot be something else” (Mirzoeff 2006, 67). Visuality is the unstable element of visual experience contingent on culture and resistant to description and can be summarised with the following question: “how did people in past or alien cultures perceive the objects we now study, what experiences and ideas grounded their viewing, and what, in the end, did they see?” (Sand 2012, 89). In this sense, Mexican visual culture or rather, Mexican visuality, provides a way of rendering visible the unspeakable, the uncertain and the invisible which is resistant to be visualised. This notion of visuality proved to be essential when trying to find ways of making sense and visualising the more ambivalent and uncertain elements of the stories I had recorded and with which I was accordingly entangled.

This way of interpreting Mexican visual culture as visuality can be linked to the efforts of Jose Vasconcelos (Mexican Minister for Education from 1921-24) and muralist painters such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco who, in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, worked to reverse Mexico’s aesthetic and intellectual dependency on foreign models. Vasconcelos’ *cosmovisión* is a worldview where *indigenismo* (indigeneity) forged an image of Mexico’s indigenous culture, “its ancient ruins, its manual arts, the country’s long history and volcanic landscape, and with mythologies old and new” (O’Brien 2013, 403). By making special claims about *mestizaje* (miscegenation), *indigenismo* is a form of Mexican modernity that celebrates the “unique phenomenon resulting from the conquest’s foundational violence” (403) as a nation-building exercise that created an image of unified mestizo identity of peoples and cultures from Europe, Africa, and Indo-America; this process of modernity, as discussed by Rubén Gallo, was received by Mexicans with mixed feelings (2005, 230).

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla argues that *indigenismo* constructs an image of Mexico far from reality that he labels *Imaginary Mexico* (2012). In direct conflict with ‘México Profundo,’ a ‘real or ‘deep’ Mexico comprised of Mesoamerican indigenous populations, Imaginary Mexico is described by Bonfil Batalla as a modernising monoculturalism that has systematically ‘de-indianised’ populations through Western hegemonic structures of power (Bonfil Batalla 2012; Caballero and Acevedo-Rodrigo 2018). The tension between ‘Imaginary’ and ‘Deep’ Mexicos is also encountered in contemporary oral storytelling practices of Mexican and Mexican immigrant families that present counter narratives to the dominant narratives at work within Mexico (Reese 2012). Similarly, the comics that I produced about my family stories provide multiple narratives that employ tropes within Mexican visual culture to destabilise the dominant narratives provided by my great-aunt, as well as rendering visible and mediating my feelings of uncertainty and discomfort around the conflict I experienced with her.

Building on Westheim’s conception of La Calavera and Tezcatlipoca as a way of understanding contemporary conflict (Westheim 1983, 5), Tezcatlipoca to me embodies a way of understanding the conflict at work when telling the stories about my great-grandparents and a way to make sense of the traumas and struggles as my family lived through the twentieth century. Tezcatlipoca is deployed specifically as a pictorial strategy that provides a way of understanding the intangible aspects that were resistant to being visualised during the intersubjective storytelling process such as feelings of uncertainty as well as processes of memory. Although there are multiple modalities available to those interested in representations of Mexicans, the development of an anthropological sensitivity invited me to emically follow the lines of my grandfather’s artwork (see Figure 10) and therefore explore drawing as a methodology to investigate the stories and pictorial dimensions of uncertainty within the stories my family tells. I ultimately decided to make a comic that engaged with the uncertainty of the situation in a more ethical manner.

Thinking and Feeling Through Comics

Graphic anthropology is having a moment (Theodossopoulos 2022). With the University of Toronto Press' *ethnoGRAPHIC* series publishing a wide range of graphic ethnographies and the RAI's *Illustrating Anthropology* exhibition in 2020, there are a number of emerging early career researchers who are using graphic methods within their ethnographies (Bonanno 2019; Haapio-Kirk 2022; Rumsby 2020; Theodossopoulos 2022). Referencing George E. Marcus and James Clifford's highly influential *Writing Culture* (1986), Benjamin Dix and Raminder Kaur (2019) inscribe drawing into the writing of cultures. Drawings, they assert, are a mode of writing cultures that has functioned as a representational practice for much longer than text has (Dix *et al.* 2019). Drawing can act not only as a perceptive tool for fieldwork but also as a mode of representation "where image and word can have a deep, intricate, and equivalent entanglement with each other" (Dix *et al.* 2019, 90). As a "parliament of lines" (Ingold 2011, 5), the ethnographic novel is a form of line-making or graphic anthropology favoured by anthropologists wanting to anonymise participants (Atkins 2013) or as 'graphic medicine' to starkly represent multiple subjects with both valid and conflicting perspectives (Czerwiec *et al.* 2020).

As an "art of communication" (Eisner 1985, 6), comics, manga, or graphic novels have the capacity to communicate a shared visual language "common to both creator and audience" (7). From panel to panel, page to page, comics play with different spatio-temporal boundaries through the interplay of text and image. Offering a path away from logocentrism, comics also work differently than film which uses the cut to compress or speed up time. In the comics medium, time works spatially: the principal technology for the passage of time is the transition between panels (McCloud 1993). This panel can both be read quickly but can also capture the reader's attention.

In *The Shape of Our Thoughts* (2012), Nick Sousanis argues that comics offer a means by which we can address the meandering and intersecting complexities at work within storytelling. In spite of their two-dimensional appearance, comics can hold multiple threads together. They have the capacity to represent uncertainty and complexity without resolving those tensions. Figure 11 is an effective example of how I was able to render complex and differing viewpoints on the page without having to provide any definitive answers on whether or not my great-grandmother Manuelita actually held my great-grandfather Chucho's lover at gunpoint. Could comics offer a way to talk about the intersubjective nature of family storytelling in a way that film could not?

Over the course of three months in 2019, I produced *Breaking Tezcatlipoca*, a 20-page comic that filtered the themes of modernity, mythology, family, trauma, and violence and that aimed to evoke the complexity of my great-grandparents' family stories as they had emerged since my fieldwork began in 2014 in Mexico City. I used pencil, Indian ink on A3 paper as well as Adobe Acrobat and Photoshop. The title *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* refers to the idea of 'breaking bad' (a southern US colloquialism in reference to the television series) in the sense that this graphic ethnography is an intentional turn towards Tezcatlipoca and the anxiety of being a human who is alive. Ambitious in the outset and uncertain as to whether this is successful beyond my own artistic endeavours, *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* encapsulates the dissolution of binaries such as life and death; memory and forgetting; truth and lies.



Figure 11: It's just one of those family stories you hear (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019, 14)



Figure 12: An extended copy of *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* (2019)

With regards to the formulation of the comic book, the concertina format (see Figure 12) was selected because of the way the graphic ethnography book changes the relationship of the reader with the object and therefore how the comic is read. Having previously experimented with the concertina book as object-memory for a family photo album about my mother's perspective on my great-grandparent's stories (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019b), the specific formulation for *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* serves to highlight the ephemerality not only of the object through the lightness of the paper but also of the phenomena of memory and forgetting. Furthermore, this is evocative of the formulation of the Aztec codices like the Codex Borgia that was actually read from right to left.

Deceptively simple, the comic book pages fold in a linear fashion to be read like a traditional comic (page to page from left to right) or it can be opened as one large expansive if opened all the way. There is nothing to stop the reader from going right to left (like the codices). Although not exactly a continual Möbius strip, it is an interpretation of Pierre Nora's "*lieux de mémoire*": a play between memory and history "bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity, enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile" (1989, 19). It provides the opportunity to "reveal other kinds of realities beyond us" (Kohn 2014) that seek to go beyond what recent anthropological discourse has challenged as "modernity's stake in the past" in which time irrevocably passes like St. Augustine's arrow of time over disappearing worlds. The comic book as object is meant to evoke the non-linear, performative and disruptive nature of intergenerational storytelling.

Echoing Marilyn Strathern and Donna Haraway's respective characterisation of anthropology as relations that study relations and how "it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (Haraway 2016, 12), Amanda Ravetz and Helena Gregory consider artistic research as "thinking-through-making" (Ingold 2013), a process of stirring what can be trusted, "through the drawing out, looping around, tensioning and slackening off of storytelling" (Ravetz and Gregory 2018, 359–360).

Making the comic in this way is a way of thinking and feeling through a process which made sense of my confrontation with the multiple versions of the stories I encountered. As a tool for representational practice, I believe that comics have the capacity to create the space for a form of radical empiricism, as defined here by Michael Jackson (1989, 4):

A radically empirical method includes the experience of the observer and defines the experimental field as one of interactions and intersubjectivity. Accordingly, we make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data. Experience, in this sense, becomes a mode of experimentation, of testing and exploring the ways in which our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart.

By placing the emphasis on intersubjective experience, the radically empirical method moves away from the positivist approach of gathering data so you can objectively know the world and instead puts forth an inherently intersubjective research process where the researcher makes sense of their subjective process of observation (Rapport and Overing 2000, 304). Anthropological research becomes a much more creative endeavour which represents a “kind of harmonic projection of the observer’s own personality” (Leach 1984, 22) and gives a deeper and more nuanced insight into the instability and uncertainty inherent in our world. Effectively, this results in an ontological shift in the type of knowledge that is produced. Figure 13 for example, is a compilation of many voices about what it meant to be a man for Chucho when he was working in the cinema industry. Although many of the family storytellers agree with the fact *that* the events happened, it is the interpretations that differ wildly. What this meant for the comic was that I could engage multiple perspectives about the same story without having to prioritise one perspective over another.

At the beginning, I attempted to draw everybody’s faces as ‘realistic’ as possible, using frames from the film interviews recorded in 2014-16 as reference points. However, after drawing a couple of pages I realised that it was not ethically correct to do so, and I decided to anonymise everyone. This resulted in the decision to present everyone as skulls, skeletons, *catrinas* and Mexican wrestlers. As discussed, in the previous paragraph the inclusion of these iconographies of Mexican visuality spoke not only to my grandfather’s work but also to an incredibly important part of the Mexican experience. McCloud (1993) explains that comics have the iconographic capacity to make cartoons feel more relatable than characters who are drawn realistically. The depiction of the storyteller as skeletons and Mexican wrestlers in Figure 13, for example, is also evocative of what Matthew Gutmann describes as a way in which male and national inferiority is expressed through the use of masks as a way for the Mexican man to protect himself from reality (Gutmann 2007).

As I was drawing, I felt incredibly vulnerable, and I believe that the masks helped me think and feel through the drawing process as much as anonymising participants within the family that didn’t want to be involved. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* series is a seminal and striking reference when it comes to graphic novels, family stories, and the post-memory of traumatic events. Many family graphic novels in the wake of *Maus* are interested in working through trauma through content and narrative form (such as Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003), Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2007), and Nora Krug’s *Heimat: A German Family Album* (2018)). Rosemary Hathaway argues that *Maus* “resists and actively challenges notions of objectivity, truth, and authenticity” (2011, 251). By thinking and feeling through the drawing process, I was tracing ways of perceiving reality that was crucial in terms of balancing my need to anonymise family members as much as thinking and feeling through traumatic moments in family histories (see Figure 14).



Figure 13: A page on monogamy, matrimony and masculinity (Sherwood Gonzalez 2019, 14)

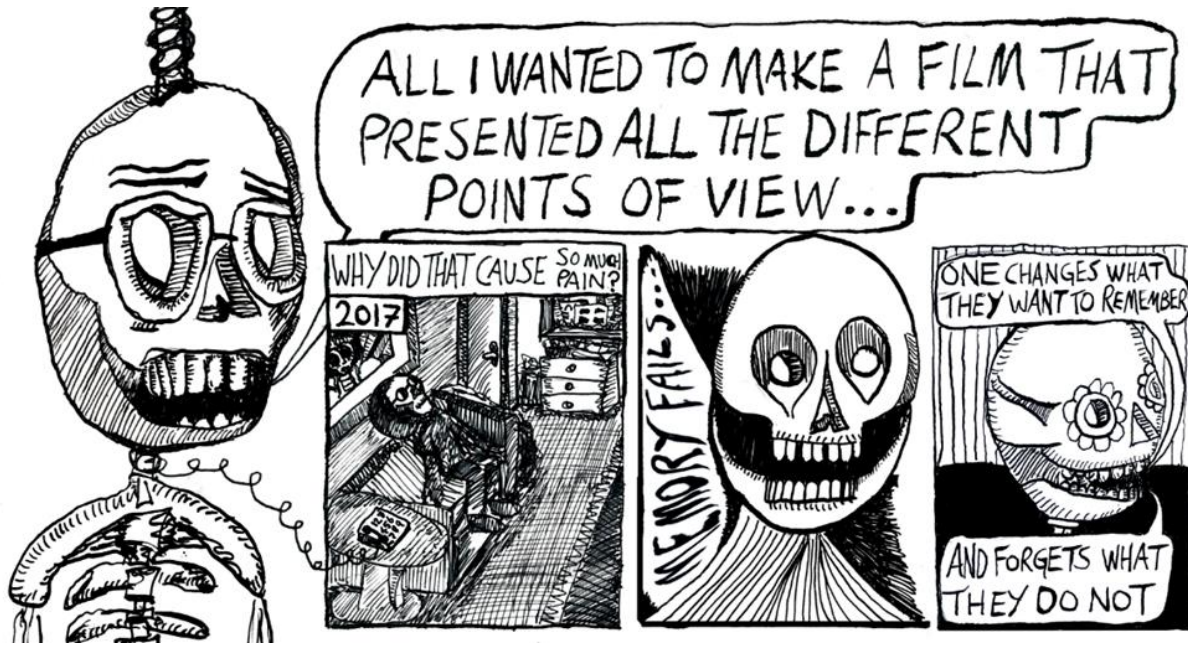


Figure 14: “All I wanted to make [sic] a film that presented all the different points of view (Sherwood Gonzalez 2022, 111)

Moving beyond ethno-fiction where participants re-play and recreate their lives and aspirations (Auge 1999; Sjöberg 2008), Dix and Kaur state that ethno-graphic novels are *vérités graphiques*, an elaboration of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *cinéma vérité*. A kind of distillate fiction or reconstructed realism, *vérités graphiques* are:

...not intended to represent “reality” in an objective sense. On the one hand, the truth or representation is based on the filtering of events and experiences through individual testimonials and the creative license deployed in working in the graphic medium. On the other, it enables participants and viewer-readers to “see the truth” in the schematized and fictionalized representations. (2019, 107)

‘Truth’ is deployed here to refer to a “generic series of events created through the affective intensities and investments in the medium” which “implies an empathetic ethic that does not objectify or sensationalize specific individuals and their experiences” in order to appreciate the “possibilities to imagine and re-create a sense of authenticity” (Dix *et al.* 2019, 107). Dix and Kaur’s “distillate fiction” is a term intended to convey a multiplicity of realities through storytelling. Described by Dix & Kaur as “stories distilled from ‘stories’” (2019, 107), comics are a way of reconstructing realism in order to appreciate “the possibilities to imagine and re-create a sense of authenticity” (107). In the context of my project, this provides a way of rendering that which felt too difficult to write about; it allowed me to think and feel through the uncertainty I was feeling with regards to my family story, placing a skeleton mask over family members so I could make sense of the stories they had shared with me.

Making Kinship Through Comics

This portfolio piece tells the stories about my great-grandparents Chucho and Manuela and the multiple ways in which my family remembers them. Tracing lines from oral/aural recordings, documentary film, photography to drawing, my search for appropriate multimodal methods to tell my great-grandparents’ story has been a difficult process which has taught me important lessons when it comes to what not to

do when planning and executing an ethically-sound ethnographic research project. I have written here about the urgency I felt to record, the multiplicity I encountered when recording the stories about those who have passed, and the difficulties I encountered when my great-aunt refused to participate in the film.



Figure 16: My aunt Rocío and Uncle Luís reading the comic. Courtesy: Gabriela Santamaría, 2022

This summer of 2022, I have been able to share with my family my comic about the stories they shared with me and everyone, including the older generation, now understands my intention to create an intersubjective study of the ways in which my family remember Chucho and Manuela. It has been an incredibly rewarding process, with the threats of the pandemic beginning to relax in Mexico, to have the time to share the comic and make sense of their reactions. I have been impressed to find that when I share the work, they begin to tell the story back to me; it continues to be a process of elicitation, much like the photos. When we have stories to tell, we will share them to those who listen. Even my great-aunt Tita understands where I am coming from but she also warned me—if I ever do release the film, only her version, – the real version!—can come out. We don't need any more earthquakes in Mexico.

Notes

1. The Spanish word for 'Grandfather' is 'Abuelo'; the diminutive suffix 'ito' is a term of endearment with the equivalent in English being 'Grandpa.'

2. *Breaking Tezcatlipoca* is freely accessible on: <https://granadacentre.co.uk/project/breaking-tezcatlipoca/>.
3. For an interactive and intersubjective graphic ethnography of this story, please see 'Story of Mirrors: Together They Cross the Border' which was published in *Trajectory* (Sherwood Gonzalez 2022). It is a radically empirical experiment that allows the reader to piece together and navigate the inherently collaborative process of family storytelling. In doing so, it offers a shift in perception, from the one-sided view of the ethnographer to the multiple intersubjectivities of the storytellers involved.
4. TÍA: Te lo cuento a ti porque un día de estos ya no existo y para que veas.
 JOSÉ: Por eso estoy haciendo este documental. El miedo de que, ya cuando tú y mi abuelito no están aquí...
 TÍA: Se acaba todo porque todos lo sabrán porque lo oyeron, pero nunca lo vieron.
5. CUENTISTA: Si, tenía su lado machín y sí había maltrato con la abuelita. Mi tía como que dice que no, cómo que no se quiere acordar. Es algo que niega, yo creo. Pero sucedió y es parte de la historia y no hay porque negarla. Y la única forma de superar todas esas cosas es viéndolas, asimilándolas, entendiéndolas para poder superar todo eso, no?
6. An offering that consists of items that welcome the deceased to the altar.
7. Skeletons and elegantly dressed skeletons. The *calavera catrina* was made famous by José Guadalupe Posada, the artist *du jour* during the Mexican Revolution. He drew everyone as skeletons ([Ingram 2019](#)).

References

- Alivizatou, Marilena. 2007. "The UNESCO Programme for the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity: A Critical Examination." *Journal of Museum Ethnography* no. 19: 34–42.
- Anderson, Kay. 2014. "Mind over Matter? On Decentering the Human in Human Geography." *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (January): 3–18.
- Anderst, Leah. 2013. "Memory's Chorus: Stories We Tell and Sarah Polley's Theory of Autobiography." *Senses of Cinema* no. 69 (December). <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/memorys-chorus-stories-we-tell-and-sarah-polleys-theory-of-autobiography/>.
- Auge, Marc. 1999. *The War of Dreams: Studies in Ethno Fiction*. Pluto Press.
- Baquedano, Elizabeth. 2014. *Tezcatlipoca: Trickster and Supreme Deity*. Colorado: University Press of Colorado.
- Bechdel, Alison. 2007. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Bonanno, Letizia. 2019. "Drawing as a Mode of Translation." *American Anthropologist*. <https://www.americananthropologist.org/ethnographic-storytelling/bonanno-drawing-as-a-mode-of-translation>.
- Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. 2012. *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilisation*. Translated by Philip A. Dennis. 9th ed. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Caballero, Paula López, and Ariadna Acevedo-Rodrigo. 2018. *Beyond Alterity: Destabilizing the Indigenous Other in Mexico*. University of Arizona Press.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Czerwiec, M. K., Ian Williams, Susan Merrill Squier, Michael J. Green, Kimberly R. Myers, and Scott T. Smith. 2020. *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. Penn State Press.
- Dix, Benjamin, Raminder Kaur, and With Illustrations by Pollock. 2019. "Drawing-Writing Culture: The Truth-Fiction Spectrum of an Ethno-Graphic Novel on the Sri Lankan Civil War and Migration." *Visual Anthropology Review: Journal of the Society for Visual Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (March): 76–111.
- Durand, Jorge, and Douglas S. Massey. 1995. *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

- Edwards, Elizabeth. 2005. "Photographs and the Sound of History." *Visual Anthropology Review: Journal of the Society for Visual Anthropology* 21, no. 1-2 (April): 27–46.
- Eisner, Will. 1985. "Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form." *Cincinnati, OH: North Light Books*.
- Fabian, Johannes. 2014. "Ethnography and Intersubjectivity: Loose Ends." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (June): 199–209.
- Flusser, Vilém. 1990. "On Memory (electronic or Otherwise)." *Leonardo* 23, no. 4: 397.
- Gallo, Rubén. 2005. *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution*. Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press.
- Gavoldón, Roberto. 1960. *Macario*. Film. Mexico: Estudios Churubusco Azteca.
- Giffords, Gloria Kay. 1974. *Mexican Folk Retablos, Masterpieces on Tin*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Gutmann, Matthew C. 2007. *Being a Man in Mexico City, Tenth Anniversary Edition, With a New Preface*. 2nd ed. University of California Press.
- Haapio-Kirk, Laura. 2022. "Special Theme Ethno-Graphic Collaborations: Crossing Borders with Multimodal Illustration." *Trajectory* 3. https://doi.org/10.51002/trajectoria_022_01.
- Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Ingold, Tim. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London, England: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Redrawing Anthropology: Materials, Movements, Lines*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Ingram, Simon. 2019. "La Catrina: The Dark History of Day of the Dead's Immortal Icon." *National Geographic*, October 18, 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2019/10/la-catrina-dark-history-day-deads-immortal-icon>.
- Jackson, Michael. 1989. *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*. Indiana University Press.
- Keating, Analouise, and Kimberly Merenda. 2013. "Decentring the Human? Towards a Post-Anthropocentric Standpoint Theory." *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 10, no. 4: 65–88.
- Kohn, Eduardo. 2014. "What an Ontological Anthropology Might Mean." *Cultural Anthropology*. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/what-an-ontological-anthropology-might-mean>.
- Krug, Nora. 2018. *Heimat: A German Family Album*. Penguin UK.
- Leach, Edmund R. 1984. "Glimpses of the Unmentionable in the History of British Social Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (October): 1–24.
- MacDougall, David. 2005. *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mantel, Hilary. 2017. "Hilary Mantel: Why I Became a Historical Novelist." *The Guardian*. June 3, 2017. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist>.
- McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- McQueen, Steve, John Ridley, Brad Pitt, Dede Gardner, Jeremy Kleiner, William Pohl, Arnon Milchan, Anthony Katagas, and Solomon Northup. 2013. *12 Years a Slave*. Entertainment One. http://www.materialserver.filmwerk.de/arbeitshilfen/12_years_a_slave_Film_Tipp.pdf.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 2006. "On Visuality." *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (April): 53–79.
- Molina, Adrian, and Lee Unkrich. 2017. *Coco*. United States: Pixar Animation Studios.
- Nora, Pierre. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." *Representations* 26, no. 1 (April): 7–24.

- O'Brien, Elaine. 2013. "Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms." In *The Cosmic Race: José Vasconcelos*, edited by Melissa Chiu, Mary K. Coffey, Benjamin Genocchio, Everlyn Nicodemus, Elaine O'Brien, and Roberto Tejada. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Okely, Judith, and Helen Callaway. 1992. *Anthropology and Autobiography Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge*. Routledge.
- Olivier, Guilhem. 2015. *Tezcatlipoca: Burlas Y Metamorfosis de Un Dios Azteca*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Patel, Ian. 2021. *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*. Verso Books.
- Polley, Sarah. 2012. *Stories We Tell*. Canada: National Film Board of Canada; Mongrel Media.
- Rapport, Nigel, and Joanna Overing. 2000. *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts*. Psychology Press.
- Ravetz, Amanda, and Helena Gregory. 2018. "Black Gold: Trustworthiness in Artistic Research (seen from the Sidelines of Arts and Health)." *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews: ISR* 43, no. 3-4 (October): 348–71.
- Reese, Leslie. 2012. "Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices." *Bilingual Research Journal* 35, no. 3 (December): 277–93.
- Rumsby, Charlie. 2020. "Retrospective (re)presentation: Turning the Written Ethnographic Text into an 'ethnographic.'" *Entanglements* 3, no. 2 (December): 7–27.
- Sand, Alexa. 2012. "Visuality." *Studies in Iconography* 33, no. Special Issue Medieval Art History Today—Critical Term: 89–95.
- Satrapi, Marjane. 2003. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. Pantheon Books.
- Sherwood Gonzalez, José. 2019a. "Breaking Tezcatlipoca." *Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology*. <https://granadacentre.co.uk/project/breaking-tezcatlipoca/>.
- . 2019b. "Vernacular Excavations." José Sherwood Gonzalez. <https://josesherwood.com/vernacular-excavations/>.
- Sherwood González, José. 2022. "Otherwise Comics." *Cultural Anthropology: Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology* Theorizing the Contemporary, no. Fieldsights (July). <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/otherwise-comics>.
- Sherwood Gonzalez, José. 2022. "Story of Mirrors: Together They Cross the Border." *Trajectoria* 3. https://doi.org/10.51002/trajectoria_022_04.
- Sjöberg, Johannes. 2008. "Ethnofiction: Drama as a Creative Research Practice in Ethnographic Film." *Journal of Media Practice* 9, no. 3 (January): 229–42.
- Sousanis, Nick. 2012. "The Shape of Our Thoughts: A Meditation on & in Comics." *Visual Arts Research* 38, no. 1: 1–10.
- Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. 2022. "Graphic Ethnography on the Rise." Society for Cultural Anthropology. #creator. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/graphic-ethnography-on-the-rise?x-craft-preview=C62hDQD7hD&token=aql7MNiIS5dzI4wpndC5ysDhveZiMZRq>.
- Westheim, Paul. 1983. *La Calavera*. Translated by Mariana Frenk. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica; Cultura SEP.