

**A Home Movie:
Reluctant autoethnography**

By

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Author's declaration.

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Abstract

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A Home Movie, Reluctant Autoethnography
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A Home Movie, an 18-minute auto ethnographic film essay, concludes a two-year process of personal study of mental health, immigration and growth. Since the first shots of the film were captured with a DSLR camera, on December of 2014 at Pearson Airport, to the last shot taken on February of 2017 at his adoptive hometown of Hamilton, Ontario, the author went through a severe personal crisis, broke a leg, traveled, inquired his loved ones on the effects of his migration on their lives, severely strained and then strengthened ties with family, lost loved ones, and achieved a better understanding of his own self. In this accompanying thesis, medical, artistic and sociological issues are carefully considered, but the crucial findings come from personal honesty and the finding of an artistic voice in the medium of film.

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To my family, who endured my absence in more ways than one during the making of this thesis, and who were there for me every single time I needed them.

To the God of love, of my childhood and my maturity, thanks for being there when I needed you.

To those who I interviewed, acted for me, gave me their opinion, and made suggestions I could use, or reject.

To the health professionals who helped me and my family in difficult times, and for those who shared their knowledge with me for this thesis.

To all of those who have the courage to migrate, and to those that have the courage to look at themselves in the mirror, and to decide you want to change your life. You are an inspiration.

Thanks to you Mari, for your love larger than my pain and my weakness. To you, Samuel and Daniel, for every minute with each one of you is a gift. To you, Sandra, my sister bird who also flew away; I miss you. To you, Juan and Julita, for you never stopped believing in me.

Dedication

To

My parents, Juan and Julita

My wife, Maritza

My sister, Sandra,

My children, Samuel and Daniel,

My in-laws, Elizabeth, Hernando, Angela,

You show me what *Home* is.

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Introduction

Immigration and mental health are subject matters that are most often discussed in their own separate niches. Considered as an uncomfortable political issue, the first one gets research coverage under the broader framework of migration and globalization studies taken up by fields as diverse as geography, sociology, criminology, and critical cultural studies. The second one, or the absence of it, we consider a public health matter, which is slowly but surely receiving the attention it always deserved. The mental health of the immigrant, though, is relatively uncharted territory, and one that this document intends to shine some light upon. Taking into consideration social, political, and medical perspectives, this thesis focuses on the potential of filmmaking as an effective tool in bringing this matter into spotlight, generate awareness of the connection, and to better understand its influence on today's society.

Personal, or very-close-to-personal experience is my main motivation behind embarking on this project. I was born and raised in Ecuador, and have been living in Canada for 13 years now. Many of us immigrants tend to bow our heads and plough through as soon as we arrive to our new homes, in order to adapt as painlessly as possible, and, thus, to *succeed* as soon as possible. A number of questions, emotions and sensations go unanswered or forgotten during that adaptation rush. Years fly by, and suddenly, those unanswered questions come back to haunt us, sometimes in moments of nostalgic longing,

and sometimes in unexpected bouts of madness. The cost of the latter can be high, especially if our minds are left untreated, untended to, or simply misunderstood. That cost is potentially paid by the system we quietly *adapted* to, by society at large, and, most painfully, by those close to us.

Using a short documentary as core studio work, this project draws from medical, literary and cultural research in attempting to grant visibility to the struggles of the immigrant mind. Every immigrant is a person like any other, and also a person like no other, and that is why personal stories, real and imagined, are folded into the theoretical research supporting the thesis, giving it an auto-ethnographic slant. Like Odysseus, the immigrant is a hero on a perilous journey away from home, but his/her giants and Cyclops are hardly visible or understood by others. However, unlike that of the Odyssey, the paper's scope is more personal than epic, its tone more intimate than grandiloquent. At the end of this journey, the researcher will be happy if the account of his personal story, struggles and all, somehow echoes in the reader's mind, and sparks a deeper discussion on the matters at hand.

Context and motivation

"I want this to go on the record. Every migrant is a hero. We are not victims. Each and every one of us is a hero. Write it down like that."
Angel Mira, in conversation with the author. November of 2014.

Is there a direct relation between immigration and the development of mental health issues? Can I use my personal experience with those two as motivation for a research that becomes pertinent for people beyond my family and inner

circle? Can the medium of film adequately convey the struggles inside the mind of an immigrant, and if so, what kind of film genre is the most appropriate for such an abstract goal? Where would an artistic project motivated by medical, social, and potentially, ethical questions reside? To arrive to these research questions, and their potential, complicated answers, I have to tell you a little story.

In 2001, I started a poorly planned and precariously documented art project: I became an immigrant. It was a life-changing decision, full of unsuspected struggles, as well as of personal growth. Just like in other personal stories, mine needs to be traced back to a retrospectively understood breaking point or crisis, which would take the reader of this paper to Ecuador in the late 1990s. Born and raised in Quito, I graduated from university with a degree in Visual Communication, and specialized in 3D animation. A few years later, I got burnt out from advertising work, and intrigued by the fact that most of my fellow countrymen, rich and poor, seemed to be leaving Ecuador for Europe and North America¹. With little responsibilities on my back, I decided that my

¹ “In the mid- to late-1990s, Ecuador entered a political and economic crisis just as clandestine transportation to the United States became increasingly expensive and dangerous. Within two years Ecuadorian migration diversified radically and a “new emigration” formed. Many thousands of Ecuadorians from throughout the country migrated to Europe, mostly Spain, but also to France, Italy, and The Netherlands. Prior to 1998, few Ecuadorians lived in Europe, but now, Ecuadorians are the largest immigrant group in Madrid and one of the largest in Spain.” (Jokisch, B. and Pribilsky, J. (2002), *The Panic to Leave: Economic Crisis and the “New Emigration” from Ecuador*. *International Migration*, 40: 75–102. doi: 10.1111/1468-2435.00206)

moral obligation was not to join the choir of people lamenting immigration or despising immigrants, but to leave my natal Quito behind and to really understand what *allá* (up there) was like. The opportunity presented itself in the summer of 2001, when I connected with a travel agency and exchanged animation services for a plane ticket to Los Angeles. After a few weeks there, I got tired from driving in California and decided instead to visit my uncle in New York. As Summer came to an end, the Twin Towers fell, my visa expired, one thing lead to another, and I ended up meeting my future wife in Bogotá, Colombia, where I established myself for just under a year. Happy days turned sour when her family decided to leave for Canada as refugees. I went back to Ecuador, where things started going surprisingly well for me: it was nice to be back; it was nice to feel loved because I was back. But my heart was already somewhere else, and in 2003, I joined my future wife in Hamilton, Ontario, where we have been living ever since. We have worked hard and built a life for ourselves, with a nice house, decent English, like-minded friends, steady jobs, two incredible kids. End of story?

Immigration as a subject matter is more complex than a personal tale of achievements. There is more to immigration, and the plight of immigrants, than what we see on the surface. Mindful of historical and political aspects, which would fill thousands of illustrious pages, I want to concentrate on exploring the impact of migration on a human being's mind, and, further, how giving that impact visibility can make the immigration process less painful for

the subject, informing the responses of healthcare providers² and society at large. My strongest motivations are the experiences of family members and friends who belong to the Hispanic community in Hamilton, Ontario. I have seen myself and several of my fellow newcomers suffer, to a different degree, of mental and psychosomatic alterations that are possibly related to, or brought up to the surface by immigration. Through volunteer work, my wife and I have met several families who struggle to adapt to a community that, while welcoming, feels alien to them: we have seen couples split up, parents and kids grow estranged, focused professionals fall into despair. I have seen my own mind crumble under a stress that I never thought would be affecting me, ending up on Psychiatric ER because of anxiety. I have been the prey of addictive behaviours. I was lucky to have a solid, broad support network around myself. Some of us, however, have needed medication and reclusion to get better, or are still struggling in silence.

Notably, there are obvious benefits for a *Latino* who immigrates to Canada: a low crime rate, universal health care, food, shelter, the hope of a brand new life, and the possibility of becoming a first-class citizen in our divided world. Not so obvious are the challenges that migration poses on minds and bodies. In order to gain insights on these challenges – beyond the affordances of direct personal experience, from myself, family and friends as motivation and

² Finlayson, Marcia, Manny J. Gonzalez, and Gladys M. Gonzalez-Ramos. *Mental health care for new Hispanic immigrants: Innovative approaches in contemporary clinical practice*. Routledge, 2013.

source of knowledge –, I interviewed several science and culture professionals in the area, with experience in immigration and mental health: Patricia Grunauer Spinner, a psychotherapist; Ángel Mila, a writer and immigration researcher; Dr. Carolina Oremus, a psychiatrist of Mexican origin who has lived and researched in Canada for several year; Dr. Alex Moreno, a family doctor who practices in Hamilton and other cities of Ontario. Their insights enhanced an initial body of bibliography that focused on mental health and culture, identity and postcolonial studies. While trying to frame my studio project, I visited the work of Latin American narrators such as Gabriel García Márquez, Santiago Gamboa, and Jorge Luis Borges for inspirations regarding storytelling. In terms of giving direction to the audio-visual language of the project, I felt the influence of canonical, autobiographical film essayists such as Chris Marker and Agnes Varda, and benefited deeply from the advice and work of contemporary Ecuadorian filmmakers such as Iván Mora Manzano and Javier Andrade. The more my project advanced, the more autoethnographic it became: graphic novelists such as Guy Delisle, Joe Sacco, and Roz Chast inspired me to be sincere and find my own voice, and thinkers such as Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, and Brené Brown made me feel that my work was valid research, and my vulnerability a valuable asset instead of useless navel-gazing.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that I am neither a health professional, nor a social scientist. I am a filmmaker and motion designer

interested in framing my own experience as an immigrant, and that of my loved ones, with the understanding that what is personal often becomes public or provides an entry point to thinking about social issues. As such, my research will be mindful of global knowledge in pertinent fields, but it will always come back to the interests of my local community of Hispanics in Hamilton, Ontario, and to my filmic and narrative practice. I find myself pulled towards the initial aesthetic sources of my younger years: literature and film with a scope so intimate that it makes them universal. However, while the project has allowed me to go back to my roots in these fields, the practice-based research made me realize that making personal art, or personal films in this particular case, is very different from creating commercial work. Transitioning between these two modes of production does not work out as smoothly as one anticipates. Whereas in commercials one would use, develop and re-purpose techniques and technology in order to make goods and services appear flawless, desirable, and easy to sell, personal work responds to a different set of standards, such as the pursuit of vulnerability, and the ability to accept the unexpected every time the camera is turned on. In the context of this experience and the present research, I found myself working on two films at once: one, a personal documentary where I respond directly to my own questions on the immigrant experience, and the other, a fictional film where a character is split in two identities, and each of those two fails to recognize the other even when they see face to face, as a metaphor for those

underlying questions that are left unanswered or unacknowledged in coming to terms with a life in the diaspora.

These low-to-no-budget experimental filmmaking experiences have been enlightening. The first film, the fictional work, was never finished, while the other one, the documentary, constitutes the core studio work that supports this paper. After the few first sessions of shooting, I found my performers (family, friends, non-actors) developing a rapport with me and with themselves, which was unprecedented, and learning things about each other – and themselves – we did not see coming. For a seasoned filmmaker, this will sound like routine, but for someone used to dealing with computers, animation curves and client requests by e-mail, this was ground-breaking: filmmaking became not only part of my research. Making these films was therapeutic for me and my relationship to those I was working with. As an immigrant, who had focused for the past 13 years in quickly adapting and being “successful”, these films became personally powerful, revelatory experiences about my family, my community and myself.

Interdisciplinary literature review

Medical studies on immigration and mental health

The impact of immigration on mental health is hard to quantify by traditional medical or statistical methods. This happens because a complex web of factors can affect the mental and physical health of a person moving, temporarily or

permanently, to a new country or even to a new city inside the same country, making it difficult to establish cause-and-effect relations. (Finlayson et. al.) The most well known framework for this impact has to be the Culture (or Cultural) Shock theory, which was explained by the Canadian anthropologist Kalevo Oberg in 1954, as relating to “an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad” (Oberg, Pg. 1). To the day, therapists, journalists and some governments use the four stages of Culture Shock described by Oberg to discuss the experience of adapting to a new culture. For instance, Immigration Canada has a link on their website where the four stages of “honeymoon, regression, adjustment and recovery” are presented as “common” for “many people (...) adapting to life in a new culture.”³ Other theorists and anthropologists, such as Cora Du Bois and Ruth Benedict, had discussed the concept as far back as 1931 (Dutton, p. 111-113)

My conversation with social worker and therapist Patricia Spinner (re)⁴ introduced me to Culture Shock as a theoretical interpretation of the issues I was interested in. This psychotherapist of Ecuadorian origin, with past practice in Toronto and now established in Hamilton, brought to the table a moving testimony:

³ "Adapt to a New Culture." Government of Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Communications Branch. July 20, 2010. Accessed March 8, 2015. Also, please look at Appendix A. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/newcomers/after-life-shock.asp>.

⁴ Spinner, Patricia. *Interview with Juan F. Bonilla*. Personal interview. Hamilton, ON, Canada, February 14, 2015. Audio

I was very interested in immigrants, especially those who had suffered emotional crisis in the Chilean community in Toronto. I met labour leaders, past prime ministers, ministers of health, teachers, peasants, who had to leave Chile because of the coup-d'état. One of them, in particular, collapsed, just could not adapt to Canada. He entered a state of psychosis, which he could not leave. He was diagnosed, received treatment and medicines.

As mentioned in my introduction, mental health issues rarely affect an individual exclusively. His or her ailments will, some way or another, touch her loved ones as well, which Spinner confirms:

(...) [Stress on parents affected] children, who entered school in a highly sensitive state, and had trouble learning. They saw their parents stressed out, unable to find work, and that affected the children, reducing their learning capabilities: they were then considered as under-achievers at school, as if there was something wrong with them. Along came psychiatrist and linguist Dr. Marlinda Freire, herself a newcomer, who did something extraordinary and advocated for these immigrants in terms of the kids not having anything intrinsically "wrong", but about them going through a culture shock, not only themselves, but through their parents too.⁵

Following Pinochet's "coup d'état" of September 11, 1973 in Santiago, thousands of Chileans fled into exile. Many of them established themselves in Canada, which was very receptive of Chilean exiles. The US, on the other hand, admitted few of them. After all, except for the Carter administration, the US collaborated very closely with the Chilean dictatorship.⁶

⁵ Spinner, Patricia. Interview with Juan F. Bonilla. Personal interview. Hamilton, Ontario, February 14, 2015.

⁶ Power, Margaret. "The Cultural Legacy of the Military Dictatorship in Chile. Review of Democracy in Chile. The Legacy of September 11, 1973 by Silvia Nagy-Zekmi and Fernando Leiva, eds.(Brighton, England and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2005.)." *A Contracorriente* 3.3 (2006): 96-106.

By this testimony, and by Dr. Freire’s intervention, it is clear to me that the mental impact of immigration, especially the one suffered by those who have gone through a traumatic experience or series of experiences, has to be considered not only by health practitioners, but also by educators and society at large, including the newcomers themselves. Culture shock presents a valuable, and thankfully officially recognized, tool to understand this process. Nevertheless, Culture Shock does not suffice as a concept in fully encompassing the immigrant experience in our days: a traditionally scientific perspective, which does not account for the nuances of each personal story, informs it. In terms of my personal experience, for instance, I consider Culture Shock as failing to address the questions related to nostalgic longing, for the people and things I left behind. Starting with Oberg and finishing with Immigration Canada, I feel the emphasis in the discourse of Culture Shock is on adapting to one’s new environment and *overcoming* Culture Shock. While an understandable goal, it feels incomplete to me, in the sense that it does not deal with the loss immigrants go through, which remains as a part of their identity in one way or another. From a filmic and literary point of view, as well, psychic elements like longing are crucial in defining diasporic characters and conflict in documentary and fictional work. As a filmmaker, I can’t just focus on “progress”. For me, personally and aesthetically, the “regression” phase is something that cannot be simply glossed over or merely left in the past, I have to really understand it and process it, for a more resonant understanding of my

migration experience.

Another aspect of the immigrant experience has to do with the disparity a newcomer can suffer in respect to receiving physical and mental health care. According to Gladys González-Ramos and Manny J. González, authors and editors of *Mental Health Care for New Hispanic Immigrants*, this disparity is not exclusive to recent immigrants, but extends to minorities of all kinds, and can come from a combination of factors in the context of immigration to the US:

While health disparities were noted as far back as 1944 (Myrdal, 1944), and many have written about them, eliminating them remains elusive. In looking at causality, research points to complex interactions among variables that can include personal, social and environmental factors.⁷

These factors can, and often do, include pure and simple politics. For instance, in the same volume, an article by David Engstrom and Lissette Piedra presents us with the following:

In the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. government was hostile to the presence of Central Americans, and consistently characterized them as illegal immigrants rather than refugees. (...) Still viewing Central America through a Cold War prism, and politically supporting military dictatorships there, the U.S. government found it politically untenable to acknowledge that the Salvadorans and Guatemalans who were crossing the borders into Mexico and the United States were actually fleeing political persecution. The U.S. government's treatment of Nicaraguan refugees stood in sharp contrast. It was more willing to recognize the legitimacy of Nicaraguan persecution at the hands of the communist

⁷ González-Ramos, Gladys, and Manny J. González. "Health Disparities in the Hispanic Population: An Overview.",. In Finlayson, Marcia, Manny J. Gonzalez, and Gladys M. Gonzalez-Ramos. *Mental Health Care for New Hispanic immigrants: Innovative approaches in contemporary clinical practice*. New York: Routledge, 2013. P. 2

Sandinistas⁸

This volume edited by González and González-Ramos sheds valuable light on the subject via medical research as well as social and political considerations, and discusses diverse factors such as cultural differences, the impact of political violence as a major stressor, and structural concerns like a health system, which is not universal. It identifies the need for health care providers and social workers to understand cultural differences not only of “Latin Americans” as a homogeneous group, but also of the different nations the immigrants come from⁹. For me, this ties in with a concern expressed by postcolonial theorist Walter Mignolo in his volume “The idea of Latin America”:

“Latin” America would come to be seen as dependent on and inferior to the United States. The concept of “Latinidad”, an identity asserted by the French and adopted by creole elites to define themselves, would ultimately function both to rank them below Anglo Americans and, yet, to erase and demote the identities of Indians and Afro-south Americans.¹⁰

Certainly, Mignolo’s concern would sound familiar to many immigrants of Hispanic origin. For instance, when I arrived in Canada I still had to painfully

⁸ “Central American Survivors of Political Violence: An Examination of Contextual Factors and Practice Issues.” Engstrom, David W., and Lissette M. Piedra. *Ibid.* P. 198.

⁹ Finlayson, Marcia, Manny J. Gonzalez, and Gladys M. Gonzalez-Ramos. *Mental Health Care for New Hispanic immigrants: Innovative approaches in contemporary clinical practice.* Routledge, 2013.,

¹⁰ Mignolo, Walter D. *The Idea of Latin America.* John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

explain to a number of –mostly well-meaning- people, that my country of origin was pretty far, and culturally different from, Mexico; that I did not necessarily like spicy food (I do now); and that I was not necessarily a great dancer. If we imagine this trivial mislabelling occurring in more serious contexts like the communication or treatment of potential mental health disorders, we will see the problem with a health care system, which is not culturally competent. As the conclusion of “The Future of Culturally Competent Mental Health Care for Latino Immigrants” suggests:

We have reached a point where developing culturally competent practices should be considered a specialized interdisciplinary concentration reflecting its unique characteristics, professional functions, and intellectual requirements.¹¹

To conclude my examination of this focused, diverse, data-rich volume, I have to express that the article that impressed me the most was “Central American Survivors of Political Violence”, by Engstrom and Piedra. Two elements made it particularly interesting for my research. First is the use of a single, personal case study, that of a Guatemalan named Ernesto, who fled a world of extreme political, social and family violence and found refuge in the US. From a narrative point of view, I find that a well-told personal story makes even the most outrageous plot relatable – and the world of violence Ernesto lives in is

¹¹ “The Future of Culturally Competent Mental Health Care for Latino Immigrants.” Vega, William A. In Finlayson, Marcia, Manny J. Gonzalez, and Gladys M. Gonzalez-Ramos. *Mental health care for new Hispanic immigrants: Innovative approaches in contemporary clinical practice*. Routledge, 2013. P. 19

hard to believe. By tying the narrative to strong quantitative and qualitative research, however, the authors successfully bring home their (politically charged) points: Central American refugees are still an underserved group; political violence, tolerated or supported by the US government at some point, continues to take its toll on people; and there is a need for “treatment approaches for helping survivors of political violence in the context of a human rights framework”¹². Reading two statements, “At the age of 10, he witnessed the death of his mother at the hands of Guatemalan security forces.”¹³ and “In Guatemala, an estimated 42,000 people ‘disappeared’”¹⁴ through a comparative lens, I find it easier to relate to the story of Ernesto, than I do to the 42,000 anonymous martyrs. The cruel violence exerted on this single individual, at that particular, terrible moment of his childhood is, somehow, more relatable than the fate of the unfortunate, anonymous 42,000. The other element of interest in this article was a discussion on the subject of loss. Engstrom and Piedra analyze Ernesto’s story in that respect, and the results are remarkably insightful:

Falicov (2002) describes the concept of “ambivalent losses” in association with the migration process, in which the gains of migrating are entangled with the losses that such a choice entails. However, the concept of ambivalent losses is difficult to apply to

¹² “Central American Survivors of Political Violence: An Examination of Contextual Factors and Practice Issues.” Engstrom, David W., and Lissette M. Piedra. In Finlayson, Marcia, Manny J. Gonzalez, and Gladys M. Gonzalez-Ramos. *Mental health care for new Hispanic immigrants: Innovative approaches in contemporary clinical practice*. Routledge, 2013. P. 171-187.

¹³ Ibid. p. 179

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 175

refugees whose migration was forced: their history of losses goes well beyond what is commonly encountered by immigrants.¹⁵

Ernesto's history of violent, unspeakable losses has a dark continuation even after he finally obtains asylum in the US and is able to bring his wife and children with him: even physically far from Guatemala and political violence, he isolates from his family and encroaches himself in work, which, for the authors, reflects the exaggerated self-reliance he developed at a very young age as a consequence of his father remarrying, isolating and abusing him shortly after Ernesto's mother died:¹⁶

The issue for Central American refugees has less to do with ambivalent losses and more to do with unrecognized and unmourned losses. Such losses have ongoing consequences for individuals and their ability to sustain relationships.¹⁷

This concept of "unrecognized and unmourned losses" is evocative, in terms of speaking to the losses that my documentary explores and providing a deeper understanding of the migration and mental health connection in the project. While not exactly through experiencing the extreme situation of a person like Ernesto, who suffered physical, very violent losses from a very young age, most immigrants can relate to the idea of loss, because what every person does when migrating, is to lose a part of him/herself in order to gain

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 179

¹⁶ Engstrom, David W., and Lissette M. Piedra. "Central American Survivors of Political Violence: An Examination of Contextual Factors and Practice Issues." In Finlayson, Marcia, Manny J. Gonzalez, and Gladys M. Gonzalez-Ramos. *Mental health care for new Hispanic immigrants: Innovative approaches in contemporary clinical practice*.

¹⁷ Routledge, 2013. P. 179-180.

something else, ideally something better than what has been lost. Yet this exchange remains mostly unaccounted for, lingering in the subconscious as a ghostly presence. In closing this chapter and delving further in this particular type of loss, it might be relevant to mention an interesting study on German professionals immigrating to the United States. Astrid Eich-Krohnm indicates that despite evident cultural and socio-economic differences, as well as completely different mind-sets from those immigrants who arrive from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia every year, the adjustment to a new life can be stressful even for highly-educated, middle or upper-middle class women from Germany, who came to the USA as tied migrants (accompanying their spouses):

Mobility and gender have the potential to have serious affects (sic) on the mental health of women as tied migrants. Depression and stress were prevalent themes in my interviews with the women migrants. They, more than the men, experienced such “low points” after the move to the United States that many of them felt a strong desire to pack their suitcases and immediately return to Germany. None of the men admitted to feeling this way. They had to overcome difficulties in their jobs, but none discussed the low point the way their wives did. For some women this feeling vanished but others experienced it for extended periods of time. Language problems, few contacts, feelings of isolation and the lack of professional opportunities were the main emotional issues that caused the low point.¹⁸

Compared to Ernesto’s story, the German wives’ struggles might seem trivial,

¹⁸ Eich-Krohnm, Astrid, 1962-*German professionals in the United States : a gendered analysis of the migration decision of highly skilled families* / Astrid Eich-Krohnm.p. cm. -- (The new Americans: recent immigration and American society). Pp. 95-96.

almost frivolous at first. Yet, at the core of these two very different case studies, it is possible to trace a pattern of people suffering due to unsuspected, unrecognized or unmourned losses, which brings me to the next chapter in my review.

The Ulysses Syndrome, and the concept of *Duelo Migratorio*

What patterns emerge behind the psychological pathologies which newcomers might suffer? In trying to find answers to that question, I found several medical studies that, while highlighting the significance of properly understanding and quantifying the impact of immigration in people, nevertheless felt limited in their approaches. Rarely did they ask if we can somehow unify, find common, dramatically useful patterns behind the variety of factors that affect the immigrant experience. While trying to fill this gap, I also decided to look into how those patterns can be expressed in an artistic medium, and how they might relate to my personal experience as well as and unanswered questions. This is where the work of Dr. Joseba Achotegui, a psychiatrist and psychotherapist with more than 30 years of experience treating Latin American and African immigrants in Spain, proved useful. Dr. Achotegui has developed the concept of “Syndrome of Ulysses”, by which he describes a unique, although often misdiagnosed, series of symptoms and related pathologies exhibited by immigrants. This “Multiple, Chronic Immigrant Stress Syndrome” relies, at its heart, on the concept of *Duelo*, literally translated as “Mourning” but also as “Loss” or even “Duel”. As none of

the English translations I have found did justice to the word by encapsulating its multiple connotations, I propose to use it directly in its Spanish form when discussing the Syndrome of Ulysses.

Dr. Achotegui describes how migration comprises not only advantages and new opportunities, but also a “dark side”, a process of loss which he calls *duelo migratorio*: literally, migratory grief or migratory mourning (p.1). Those who migrate, expands Achotegui, go through at least seven kinds of *duelos*. They leave behind family and friends, language, culture, land, social status, contact with their ethnic group, and they suffer physical integrity risks inherent to the migratory travel (p.1). That sense of loss, or grief, is different from that of the death of a loved one, in the sense that what has been lost does not disappear completely; it “stays where it was, and it is possible to contact it again eventually”. There is, then, an “emotional come-and-go” in relation to the homeland (fig. 1). Contact with the land, people and culture left behind can be variably active throughout the life of the immigrant, keeping him or her in a limbo or perpetual state of lost and found. (Achotegui, p. 3).

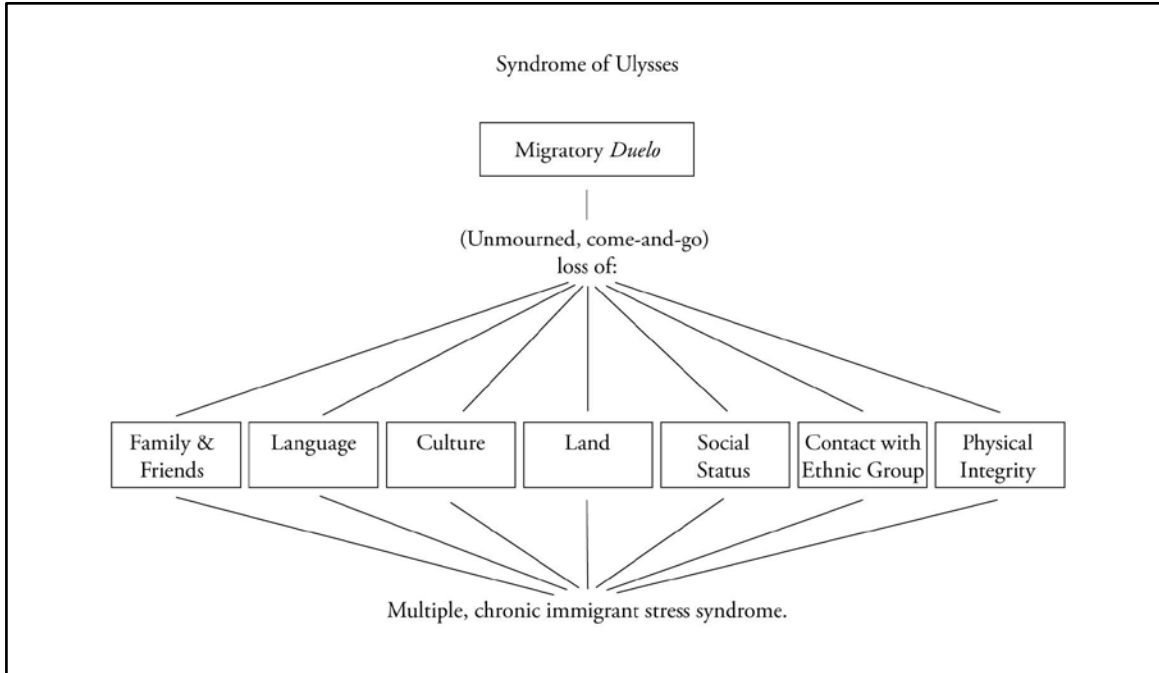


Fig. 1. A visual representation of the Syndrome of Ulysses and how the unmourned, come-and-go losses of migration can create multiple, chronic stress.

Achotegui emphasizes that we, as human beings, are capable of migrating successfully, and that migration is not, in and of itself, a cause of mental imbalance, but rather a risk factor for the mental soundness of a person, especially if the migrant is vulnerable, or the new environment proves a hostile one which, under the current global political situation, it frequently is (Achotegui p. 1, 4-5).

My personal experience taught me that migration does take a toll on one's mind. In fact, when I seriously first started inquiring on my issues, I blamed migration squarely. Digging deeper via psychotherapy, combined with the use of filmmaking and writing as a way to facilitate introspection, however, I

discovered that a number of unresolved questions and issues from my youth had surfaced, and possibly got exacerbated and compounded by migrating. In that sense, migration was not the only “culprit” of my issues, but rather a defense mechanism I used in my past, in order to avoid dealing with my own personal issues, and then, with time, a trigger for mental issues that surfaced when I least expected them.

The Syndrome of Ulysses, Achotegui concludes, can appear when migration happens under duress and the stressors on the individual are extreme and destabilize their personality, causing symptoms related to (or frequently confused with) depression, anxiety, migraine, osteo-articular pain, and even episodes that resemble psychosis (p.6). On the other hand, Dr. Carolina Oremus, a PhD psychiatry candidate of Mexican origin and an immigrant to Canada herself, argues that the Syndrome of Ulysses is not specified as a disorder in the DMS-5¹⁹, which constitutes the main reference for health professionals when diagnosing and treating mental disorders. Dr. Oremus also mentions that Ulysses can be characterized as some sort of adjustment disorder, but not specifically linked to immigration. This implies that, at least in Canada and the US, there is no official recognition of a connection between mental health and immigration. Nevertheless, the APA admits that there is work to be done in defining and treating disorders.

The mental health establishment, thus, has not recognized the Syndrome of

¹⁹ DMS-5: The American Psychiatry Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth Edition, released on May 2013.

Ulysses as proposed by Achotegui. The connection between migration and mental health is still a bit fuzzy from a scientific point of view, which also makes it prime territory, for artistic (less normative) exploration of the matter.

Literary and Filmic Perspectives

Santiago Gamboa (Bogotá, 1965) is an author, who lived, studied and worked abroad, in Spain and France respectively. His novel *El Síndrome de Ulises* (2005) narrates the experience of a young, struggling writer in the seedy Paris of recent newcomers. According to Gamboa, his own years in Paris were “intense, difficult,”²⁰ captured in the overarching intense atmosphere of the story through the novel’s autobiographical tone. In it we read the diverse, extreme ways, in which his fellow immigrants cope with their own *duelos* and unmet needs.

An African waitress who dabbles in prostitution and an Eastern European drug addict whose father dies back home, causing her to she suffer a crisis because her immigration status prevents her from going back to say goodbye. A cloud of sex addicts and alcoholics from around the world and from Academia. A workaholic restaurant *plongeur*, whose wife is imprisoned back in North Korea, ends up suffering a heart attack because of stress. A former

²⁰ Intxausti, Aurora. "Gamboa Narra En 'El Síndrome De Ulises' Las Peripecias De Los Inmigrantes En París." *EL PAÍS*. Ediciones El País S.L., 2005. Web. 27 Oct. 2016.

Colombian guerrilla, who kills a French teenager in defense of his homosexual lover, then disappears leaving a trail of mystery behind²¹... Do I identify with any of Gamboa's unnamed writer's friends and acquaintances in Paris? Under duress, under similar circumstances, will our minds react the same?

On item 2.5 of his discussion on the Ulysses Syndrome, Dr. Achotegui discusses how migratory grief affects the identity of a person. The multiplicity of changes suffered by the newcomer, he argues, ends up modifying the personality and even the identity of the subject. If those changes go well, the subject becomes a mature, worldly person. If they go wrong, his psychosocial and psychological self will destabilize (p.3).

This instability as well as other key issues related to identity, such as self-representation and belonging (p.3), were to be explored in my failed short film about two immigrants' lives. One of the immigrants was to be *successful*, having been able to adapt to her new environment, learn the language, find success at work and establish a family. The other was to live still with her mother, attending adult ESL school for what feels like an eternity, and just not feeling at ease at her new environment. The idea was to have both characters played by the same actress. Even if at some moments both characters would share the same space in scenes, they were not to acknowledge each other. Underneath this admittedly Manichean duality of superficial outcomes, what

²¹ Gamboa, Santiago. *El Síndrome De Ulises*. Bogotá: Editorial Planeta Colombiana, 2005. Print.

redeemed these characters from flatness in my mind was that they were united by the same sense of loss, the same grief that does not distinguish the one with money from the one taking the bus. At the moment of migratory grief, even if miles apart, they shared the same look of nostalgia in their eyes. Only when they would, eventually, face their unsolved, personal *duelos*, were they ever to be able to “see” each other and come to terms with where and who they are, to move forward with their lives without forgetting where they came from. Their multiple, respective identities, are metaphorically one and the same. Borges, probably inspired by Plato, formulated the idea that, *in the vertiginous instant of coitus, all men are the same man*²². In echoing Borges, this incomplete film proposed that when in grief, when in *duelo*, all immigrants become but one immigrant.

Yet, it soon became evident that this particular approach had limitations: the idea worked better in paper than it did in film. In hindsight, however, I saw a cinematic opportunity here. Researching the emotional identifications that occur during the under-studied moment of immigrant *duelo* presents itself like a worthy idea to be pursued through filmmaking. I long for capturing the subtle, hard to define moments, part *saudade*, part nostalgia, when an immigrant remembers a particular corner of the earth he/she will never see again. These moments can’t just be forgotten, but have been left behind and somehow need to be re-lived; the lost pieces of time and space they evoke,

²² Borges, Jorge Luis. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." *Obras completas* 1 (1940): 431-43.

mourned.

It is admittedly a paradoxical desire that this thesis harbours: by telling the intimate story of a person, it wants to evoke the story of two, three, four, dozens or thousands of people. Good narrators routinely achieve this kind of distributed connection with their audience. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García-Márquez tells the story of two brothers, Aureliano and José Arcadio, whose personality traits are echoed over and over again through their descendants, who are identified with direct or indirect variations of the seminal two names. And through their individual trajectories, we learn about the family, their town, their forgotten region and country. Ultimately, the way those stories are told, the narrative arcs of two characters provide the backdrop upon which the reader gets to contemplate about subject matters such as imperialism, Caribbean, Colombian and Latin American identities, violence, the supernatural, love and fate.²³

I was having trouble finding a similarly validating source from the film world, until *Sans Soleil* came to my rescue. Watching Chris Marker's classic essay film was a revelation. Here was a film that did not shy away from handheld shots of people, architecture, and a variety of cat shots. The off-camera narrator, although protected by a fictional premise and a voice actress, reflected on very personal sensations, moments, distance and time in a direct and poetic fashion. By extricating himself from his native France, and sincerely filming,

²³ Garcia Marquez, Gabriel. "100 years of solitude." (1973).

reflecting and fictionalizing in the first person, Marker somehow ended up filming *himself* without shooting straight at the mirror. I realized that what I wanted to capture were similarly fleeting sensations and, at the time, undefined feelings in terms of my relation with my loved ones, with the cities I have migrated to and from, and, more scarily, with *myself*. At the time, I believed most of these sensations had a physical connection to my home country of Ecuador, as opposed to my new home in Canada. And I was terrified at the idea of shooting straight at the mirror.

These examples from the literary and filmic canon bring to light the issue of identity:

[Identity] is the sum of self-representations which allow a subject to feel, on one hand, similar and belonging to certain communities, which share values and ideas, and on the other hand, different and not belonging to others. To reference one person's identity is to reference a game of similitudes and differences; we could call it a game of mirrors.

(Achotegui, P. 3)

Could we say, extending our Ulysses metaphor, that the quest of the immigrant is solving each one of her *duelos*, and in such fashion, that of building the sum of self-representations? Maybe that is the heroism I want to find in the idea of the immigrant as a hero²⁴. Not one of military achievements, fame and marbled recognition, but the epic journey of building (finding, confronting, accepting) oneself daily, through small, personal, subtle personal victories, where each one of those victories creates a new, unique way of

²⁴ Mira, Angel, Conversation with Juan Bonilla. March 2014.

understanding and representing oneself. The *immigrant* is the other because of the way she is *a priori* represented by society: by way of those personal, and/or community achievements, she becomes an agent, a fully mature human being whose objective is not mere *assimilation* or *adaptation*, but to achieve self-respect, and to feel that her losses have been recognized, accepted and processed in their own unique, personal way.

Methodology and process

A Friend of a Friend and other terrible ideas.

While researching the subject for this paper, I struggled to find a way to study, film and/or represent the “immigrant mind” for a while. With an advertising and motion design background, I developed a PSA-styled short film where me and my family, heads covered by cartoony bags of paper, illustrated the stigma of mental health (*A Friend of a Friend*), and then an attempt to experimental narrative filmmaking (*A Forest*) where two symbolic female characters, Anxiety and Serenity, would find each other in the enigmatic forest of the human mind. None of those were particularly successful, and my academic colleagues, while very tolerant, were quickly becoming a distant, confused audience for me. I then developed a short film script where an immigrant woman has two parallel lives, one successful and the other poor and struggling, and her two avatars don’t recognize each other even if they see themselves on the street, on their workplace, around the city, every day. I

started filming this script, but quickly grew sceptical at how convoluted, symbolic and symmetrical the story was feeling. The subject was getting lost, my story was not hitting the narrative target I was after, and the tone felt flat and artificial to me.

At one point in my academic struggles, a member of OCAD faculty confronted me with the question: *Yes but who is your subject?* It took me a moment to recover, and months and months to answer the question. I had started writing this thesis and other papers; I had done my research on the “subjects” of immigration, of mental health, of colonialism, of anything that would sound academically valid. But in the end, *who* was my subject, what did I *want*, or better, *need* to film? I knew, deep inside, that I needed to film my own *duelo*, my own migrant *saudade*. How was I going to do that?

Film Essay and Autoethnography, a brief review.

As opposed to a conventional narrative film or a traditional documentary, a film essay offers a commentary, an analysis, or an opinion on a specific event or subject matter, with a personal presence by the author.²⁵ Timothy Corrigan makes a passionate and sound defense of the film essay as its own separate genre, distinct from a traditional documentary. Within this genre, the role of the self and its relation to the public become a motif:

Appearing within many different artistic and material forms beside the essay film, the essayistic acts out a performative representation of self as a kind of self-negation in which narrative or experimental structures are

²⁵ Corrigan, T. (2011). *The essay film: from Montaigne, after Marker*. New York: Oxford University Press.

subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience.²⁶

While discussing the essay film, Corrigan refers to the literary tradition of the essay; this resonates with me since my sources of inspiration for personal work were books, essays and graphic novels first, and films came later. A common trait of well-recognized essay films such as Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) and Agnes Varda's *Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse* (2000), for instance, is the fact that they take their time with their shots. Average shot length is significantly longer than, say, a Michael Moore film. This might seem like an imposition on the viewer, but on the other hand, it gives the viewer all the time needed to absorb the image and the sound, and meditate on the content, instead of just consuming it. A similar experience, to a point, to the reading of a written memoir such as Augustine's *Confessions* or a graphic novel such as Guy Delisle's *Jerusalem*. After each paragraph, after each page and panel, I can spend as much time as I want reflecting on what I just read. This hypothetical reflection between author (filmmaker) and reader (viewer), together with the fearless presence of the author's persona in the text (film), might be part of what Corrigan calls the *essayistic* aspect of film, and other art forms:

...the essayistic indicates a kind of encounter between the self and the public domain, an encounter that measures the limits and possibilities of each as a conceptual activity.²⁷

Here it is, then, a filmmaking style that allows the makers to take their time, to

²⁶ Ibid. p. 6.

²⁷ Corrigan, Timothy. *The essay film: from Montaigne, after Marker*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

reflect, to allow (encourage?) their viewers to reflect, and to be free of mainstream cinema's narrative conventions. It can have elements of documentary and allows the director to get personal. One interesting thing that happens in the films that Corrigan mentions is that the "personal" aspect frequently involves a first-person narrator. This crucial aspect of the filmic grammar involves an intimate connection with the viewer that third-person, traditional fiction films or observational documentaries simply don't have. The filmmaker (author) frequently has to establish a horizontal, sincere dialogue with the viewer (reader), based on perceived honesty and vulnerability, in order to achieve suspension of disbelief and at the same time, be part of the subject matter being discussed.

A vulnerable and inquisitive self, and blurred disciplinary boundaries are also characteristics of a research method that stems from the social sciences: autoethnography. As opposed to traditional ethnography, where a researcher immerses her *self* in a cultural environment and documents it from an impersonal perspective, collecting data external to her self, autoethnography not only acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher, but also uses the researcher's personal experiences as primary data.²⁸ The focus on the personal does not undermine the validity of the research as long as the researcher intends the process to "expand the understanding of social

²⁸ Chang, Heewon. Individual and Collaborative Autoethnography as Method. A Social Scientist's Perspective. Chapter 3 in Jones, S. H., Adams, T. E., & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of autoethnography*. Routledge.

phenomena.”²⁹ Such insistence on self-inscription in framing the social resonates with the *encounter between the self and the public domain* that Corrigan describes as happening in the essayistic film.³⁰ The essay film and autoethnography can also have more direct connections. It is common for autoethnographic research to have diverse outputs and the resulting document can have narrative and artistic implications, beyond the original disciplinary intents -that is to say, an autoethnographic project may end up being disseminated to the public in the form of an essay film, as easily as it can be published as an academic publication. Arthur Bochner talks about a “new rubric of poetic social science” when discussing autoethnography, for example. Of course, there is discussion on how to “measure” the quality and efficacy of autoethnographic efforts. Both Heewon Chang and Arthur Bochner provide their own sets of criteria, while admitting that the need to set certain standards stem from disciplinary insecurities:

In the social sciences, we have never overcome our insecurities about our scientific stature. In our hearts, if not in our minds, we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft. Somewhere along the line, we became convinced that these qualities were signs of inferiority, which we should not expose. (...) Traditionally, we have worried much more about how we are judged as “scientists” by other scientists than about whether our work is useful, insightful, or meaningful—and to whom. 31

With that caveat in mind, Bochner presents the following criteria as his own

²⁹ Ibid. p. 108.

³⁰ Corrigan, Timothy. *The essay film: from Montaigne, after Marker*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

³¹ Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitative inquiry*, 6(2), 266-272.

personal benchmarks for autoethnographic work. Since this is a paper centered on my own *essayistic* film, I will use it as a test subject for each criterion. Initially, Bochner describes how he sees these alternative ethnography narratives.

1. “First, these are usually, but not always, narratives of the self”. (Bochner 2000, p. 270) Bochner quotes Freeman to defend personal narratives against its critics, who point out possible distortions in the truth. The fact is that any “empiricist account of reality” will always be affected by the person providing the account, so why not embrace the researcher’s subjectivity instead of negating it? In *A Home Movie*, the narrator speaks from a first-person POV, and directly presents his family to the audience, their answer to his difficult personal questions, and towards the end, reveals himself.
2. “Second, the purpose of self-narratives is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived.” (p. 270) Here, Bochner insists on autoethnography being more existential than academic. *A Home Movie’s* premise was to dig deep on my family’s feelings, to find out what they felt about me and about seeing the youngest generation relocate to the diaspora in general. One of the meanings I extracted from the interviews was that the process of self-discovery, as in

coming to accept my own feelings and shortcomings in trying to give voice to other people's, was as important as what was being uttered. I feel the essayistic, as per Corrigan, is present here too: the main objective is not to depict what happened without missing anything out, but to explore what the events -and feelings, and reflections- can reveal to the artist/researcher/filmmaker and to the public about a subject matter .

Bochner also specifies what helps establish if an autoethnographic account guides "the reader or listener to understand and feel the phenomena under scrutiny."³²:

1. Underlining the significance of affect, he states: "First, I look for abundant, concrete detail (...) not only facts, but also feelings." (p.270) *A Home Movie's* narrator presents facts in a deadpan fashion, and delves deep on feelings. A characteristic of film is that what is shown is not necessarily the same as what is being said or heard, which creates a third level of expression and understanding. The tone in which a fact is presented, or the collusion of incoherent imagery and narration, for instance, might imply or suggest a feeling without being explicit.
2. Also of importance is temporal organization: "Second, I am attracted to structurally complex narratives, stories told in a temporal framework

³²Bochner, Arthur P. "Criteria against ourselves." *Qualitative inquiry* 6.2 (2000): 266-272

that rotates between past and present reflecting the nonlinear process of memory work -the curve of time.” (p.270) *A Home Movie* is linear in its facts, but the collection and exposure of feelings, hopes and desires blurs the sequentiality of time. For instance, grandmother Fanny evokes the narrator’s youth when he scurried out of his room for fresh fruit juice, as she watches the narrator’s offspring playing in the living room. Here, what is presented is “recollection image, ” a kind of memory inducing image that Deleuze associates with flashbacks in *Cinema II: Time-Image*, yet conveyed through a personal testimony in the present.³³

3. As in the case of the essay film, it is crucial for autoethnographies to acknowledge vulnerability: “Third, I almost always make a judgment about the author’s emotional credibility, vulnerability, and honesty.”(p.270) This was probably the hardest thing to account for while making *A Home Movie* for me. Initially conceived as an inquiry of immigration and mental health, I was torn toward the end in terms of how honest and detailed I was going to be. Admitting to an addiction that wreaked havoc in my family, larger than and predating my migratory experience, was not an easy thing to do, but it was necessary for the film to be honest.

³³ Deleuze, Gilles. "Cinema 2: The time-image, trans. hugh tomlinson and robert galea." *London: Athlone* (1989).

4. Strong autoethnographies also involve journeys of self-discovery: “Fourth, I prefer narratives that express a tale of two selves; a believable journey from who I was to who I am, a life course reimagined or transformed by crisis”. (p.270) Again, the hardest part to talk about in *A Home Movie*, started in December 2014 and finished by February of 2017, was to address the personal crisis that exploded in the narrator’s life starting on April of 2015. The main transformation, as I see it, is the ability of the narrator to finally be honest with himself, starting with beautiful shots of his family, and then declining to the dark shots of the crisis phase. Towards the end of the movie, the slide towards honesty and self-acceptance is represented by him showing his face. The crisis is ongoing, but it is easier to face it with newfound honesty. An exemplary film in this regard is the film essay *Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse* (2000), in which Agnes Varda identifies with gleaners of different kinds (labourers, artists, people from all walks of life trying to make a living), and reflects on the transformation of the skin in her hands (captured in images gleaned through her digital camera) as a sign of aging throughout the film. In an alternative essayistic expression in a medium other than film, Roz Chast narrates the decline and death of her parents in *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (2014), and the reader can not only read about but see the maturing of Roz, author, narrator and central character, throughout the

graphic novel's pages.

5. The fifth criterion relates to self-reflexivity and the ethics of representation: "Fifth, I hold the author to a demanding standard of ethical self-consciousness. I want the writer to show concern for how other people who are part of the teller's story are portrayed..." (p. 271). *A Home Movie* pays special attention to how each subject is treated, but it is important to note that the way I interacted with my family has changed over time. In some points, I am sarcastic with my father, I stonewall my mother, I fail to connect to my wife, I use my kids to show off the beautiful part of my family. However, the process of self-discovery, mentioned in point 4, has also helped shape my attitudes towards the family for the better. In *Stories We Tell* (2012), Sarah Polley inquires his father and close family about her late mother, her affair with Sarah's biological father, and does so in an utterly respectful way. The way Polley shows respect is by being completely honest in terms of her own feelings when communicating with the people in her life. She does not shy away from showing the disappointed face of her father Michael when he finds out he is not her biological father, but her serenity and blunt acceptance of the awkwardness of the moment dignifies the impact of the revelation. That she accounts for everybody's reaction to the revelation also helps convey her consciousness not just of her own feelings, but the feelings of all those

that the events affect.

6. Lastly, a good autoethnography can speak to matters that transcend one's own personal struggles: "Sixth, and finally, I want a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head; I want a story that doesn't just refer to subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show me what life feels like now and what it can mean". (p. 271) Since I am still very close to my work, this feels like a judgement I can't make on *A Home Movie* yet. However, in the middle of my crisis in Ecuador (August 2016), I showed the work in progress of the film to a small group of my friends with experience in film directing and producing: Iván Mora Manzano, Javier Andrade, Arturo Yépez, María José Elizalde, Jorge de Los Santos and Alfredo Mora Manzano all saw the rough cut, and had a plethora of comments on how to improve it, but they did seem touched by the narrative and the honesty they perceived, which was encouraging.

The film essay and autoethnography, thus, belong to different disciplines, but they do share a number of common traits. One has an aesthetic motivation, the other is a method of research. The intersection, though, is evident and enriching, and I think in that intersection is where my project *A Home Movie* resides.

A Home Movie, embracing the vulnerable me.

Autoethnography is a method of qualitative inquiry, a “fusion between social science and literature”³⁴ where the author’s *vulnerable self* is included. Film essay is a filmic genre where vulnerability is necessary for the author’s persona to sincerely discuss the matter at hand and acknowledge his own presence. The issue of vulnerability is one that made *A Home Movie* such a revealing project for myself. In terms of the filmic process, I could see vulnerability present at all aspects of the shoot, but mostly during the editing phase.

The process of film editing has become at the same time a powerful narrative tool, and a painful reminder that not all of those shots we treasure at the shooting stage will make it into the final cut of the film. In the end, the process is a careful consideration of what to show, for how long, and what to leave out, known to us, but not to our audience. Similarly, dealing with vulnerability in the autobiographical filmmaking process involves picking and choosing what to expose, how to expose it, and what to leave out. In the case of *A Home Movie*, the initial questions I had, and based my film upon, related to my migratory experience and how it affected my mental health and that of my beloved ones left behind. While I was editing the film, a huge personal crisis exploded in my life as a consequence of mental health and addiction issues, and harder

³⁴ Ellis, Carolyn. "Heartful autoethnography." *Qualitative health research* 9.5 (1999): 669-683.

questions about myself surfaced. At that point, the film became impossible to edit: on one end I had the immigration footage, questions and answers, and in the other, the new footage related to the personal crisis and recovery, which did not seem to relate to the original work. The temporary solution was to take out the problematic, unresolved part of the film out of it, and finish a “clean” version of the film without addressing the crisis. Meanwhile, I intended to film, edit and solve, as a separate sequence to insert later, the section related to the just-discovered issues. That way, I considered I could manage my vulnerable self and introduce it again to the narrative, hopefully crafting a cohesive whole in such fashion. Merely leaving vulnerability out would have been a dishonest solution, and of course it would have left the mental health issues and consequences out of the story.

In *A Home Movie*, I function as a first-person, unnamed narrator, who uses several uncomfortable questions as a conversation starter with my parents, my late grandmother, and my wife. In perspective, the questions were not really that uncomfortable in themselves, but *they were uncomfortable for me to ask*. The questions were, roughly: “*What do you feel about me leaving?*” and “*What is home for you?*” The questions were chosen because I felt there were unexpressed emotions tied to them, both from my parents, and from myself. I admit they were a bit exploitative from an emotional point of view, because I am asking my loved ones to consider my absence and express the resulting emotions in front of a camera. In my defense, it was equally hard for me to

bear the harsh reality of not being around my parents, to accept my own absence from my land and from their daily lives. The interviews were not carefully planned, I merely kept my camera around, fully charged, and had the questions in the back of my head for when the moment felt right. It was especially hard for me to ask my mother these questions on my first try at the movie (December of 2014), so I didn't, and started with my wife and my dad (January of 2015). Then, I talked to my grandmother, and almost a year later (December of 2015), I was able to talk to my mom while visiting Colombia with my wife and kids.

The conversation with my father was an encouraging start and is the first one included in the movie. He poetically compares my sister (living in Europe) and I with little birds that have flown out to the world, but whose nest is always ready to greet them back whenever they need to. The interview took place while he was driving me to Old Town Quito, and we had the opportunity to visit our old house on our way there. That moment in particular was less than a romantic one.





Fig. 2. A visit to the old house, *A Home Movie* Excerpt.

I wanted to make a nostalgic stopover and maybe visit the interior of the house, but the old neighbourhood had deteriorated quickly, and our former house had become a seedy hotel. Out of safety considerations, we did not even get out of the car. My nostalgia on my old house had been solved at that point. Next up is an interview with my grandmother, who had a health scare while we were visiting, and, in total lucidity the day after, commented our imminent departure to Canada, and her mourning of our migration, with the same resignation she acknowledged her own mortality. A few months after our visit, she actually passed away.



Fig. 3 The last time I saw Granny. *A Home Movie* Excerpt.

Left: my late grandmother Fanny surrounded by my cousins, my sister (crying) and I (head cut).

Right: interview with my grandmother Fanny, January of 2015.

Shortly after the death of my grandmother (March of 2015), a personal crisis started like no other in my life (April 2015). I took a leave from my job and my studies, and work on this movie and this thesis. I did not know it at the time, but the crisis, which lasted, on and off, more than a year, was the beginning of a serious look at my own life and how I was living it. I had secretly fallen into addictive behaviours, and the revelation of those behaviours affected my relationship with my family. My mental health issues, it turns out, went deeper than what we have described as Ulysses' syndrome. This became an opportunity to take a close look at deeper personality issues that I had not resolved since my early youth. Months of therapy, support groups, a re-encounter with my faith and my loved ones, helped me start a healing process for myself and for my family. My questions on immigration gave me more answers than those I was looking for.

I resumed work on the movie in September 2016, and found a key point about

migration and the construction of the self in an interview with my wife, Maritza.



Fig.4 The perfect place for the migrant, the place that does not exist. *A Home Movie* excerpt.

We leave behind our families, our memories, our childhood... colours, flavours, aromas. At the same time, at our new home we have found new things, things that we miss because we don't have them we are back here. It would be nice to join these two separate places in one. One place with things from the old place and the new place. But that place does not exist, so we have to live either travelling, or remembering.³⁵

When I started work on the movie, a couple of years ago, I judged Maritza's answers to be too pragmatic, even cold. As with the questions I had trouble asking my parents, the problem was not in her answer, or in the questions, but in my perception of them. Her answer was really insightful. Compare her notion of the fictional place migrants yearn for, with Chris Marker's idea of *dépays*.

Mon pays imaginaire, mon pays que j'ai totalement inventé, totalement investi, mon pays qui me dépayse au point de n'être plus moi même que dans ce dépaysement. Mon dépaysement.³⁶

³⁵ Orozco, Maritza, in Juan Bonilla, *A Home Movie* (2017), digital video.

³⁶ Marker, Chris. *Le Dépaysement*. Paris: Herscher, 1982. Print.

This was intriguing. Is Maritza and Marker's *dépays* the essence of the migrant self? Do we all, migrants or not, have a *dépays* in each one of us? Probably what Achotegui calls "Syndrome of Ulysses" are the struggles a migrant faces in order to accept, create, define his or her own *dépays*. *A Home Movie*, a film that started as an essay about home and those left behind, ended up being my personal account of this particular struggle, on how the mourning of migration actually brought deeper scars to the surface, and how facing those wounds was crucial for my mental health, for the acceptance of my own *dépays*.

The kind of stories we embrace moves away from the world of brute facts toward the realm of human meanings. (Bochner and Ellis, 2003)³⁷

After years of denying my own impossible *dépays*, which might mean actually denying and neglecting myself (my-self), autoethnography helped me to discover that it was OK to face it, to expose it. It might not sound as much as a brute fact (don't we all face the mirror every morning?), but the human meaning for me was huge.

Conclusion

In *A Home Movie*, I summarize my crisis with a few symbolic shots. Birds on a drab winter day, standing in convoluted tree branches. A long shot, jump-cut in post, of myself burning pages of my addiction inventory. My hands rubbing

³⁷ Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis. "An introduction to the arts and narrative research: Art as inquiry." *Qualitative inquiry* 9.4 (2003): 506-514.

frantically against each other, as expressions of inner turmoil, and then settling down for serenity.



Fig. 5,. Inner turmoil, burning addiction inventory. *A Home Movie* excerpt.

Then, I am ready to face my mother's answers to my questions, and to receive her send-off and blessing. Once again I am compared to a winged being.



Fig. 6. A mother's emotional blessing. *A Home Movie* excerpt.

*I feel that you are free to fly wherever you want to. (...) (When you leave) I feel that my angel physically leaves me, but he is with me. (...) Dear God, please bless my son and may he be better, better and better everyday. And may he be happy. I always want that for you, that you are happy.*³⁸

My therapist would always say that the best way a son or a daughter can honour their parents, is to be happy. In my case, it was really hard to be happy, because I was holding on to so much inside myself. My crisis was a turning point for me, and helped me start a process of healing through honesty and self-expression, which in turn helped with self-awareness, and paradoxically, awareness and acceptance of the pain and hope in my loved ones. Those questions, and the feelings related to them, that were so hard to face in the beginning, became easier to accept, if not always to give an easy answer. I am thinking there is an essayistic part to my work and an autoethnographic component, and I am not completely sure if I have made a major contribution to either field. What I know at this point is that I have started to face my shortcomings and to tell my story, as an immigrant and a human being, and I have reached a point where I know I am turning my life around, and living in complete honesty, which, migrant or not, is my definition of mental health.

For now, I am happy with that.

³⁸ Julita Vera, in Juan Bonilla's *A Home Movie* (2017). Digital Video.

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Addendum

Present at defence of this thesis on March 28, 2017 at OCAD U's Open Gallery Black Box were principal advisor Philippe Blanchard, secondary advisor Selmin Kara, program director and defence chair Barbara Rauch, internal-external advisor Min Sook-Lee, external advisor Guillermina Buzio, and my lovely wife Maritza Orozco. *A Home Movie* was screened and then a discussion ensued.

Some key aspects emerged:

- a. Whereas the initial subject matter for this thesis was the migratory experience and its relation to mental health, the research process slowly but surely evolved into a question of the self. What are the ways in which the self can be represented in a film work?
- b. There are distinct models of the migratory experience that were not considered in the initial thesis. How can this research address those? Discuss the issue of fragmentation, crucial for the migratory experience. Filmic space, cultural space, family space. What is the space where the questions asked in my research and studio work are formulated and answered?
- c. What is next for *A Home Movie* and its associated research? Should the film be considered a purely cathartic exercise and kept private? Should it be further developed?

a. From migration to self-questioning and self-representation.

During her first intervention, Min Sook Lee remarked how little my film had to do with what she understood as “migration”: most of the film takes place in my country of origin, Ecuador, with the exception of a few shots in Canada, and one interview shot in Colombia. My film deals more with solving my relationship with Ecuador, rather than typical “migrant” issues of a newcomer to Canada, my adopted homeland. During my response, I acknowledged that my migratory experience had been easier than what numerous migrants have had to experience. For instance, I came in safely by plane, I was then sponsored by my wife, and was able to find work in my field without a lot of hassle, my paperwork being processed in a straightforward, relatively quick time line. Other migrants have had to endure years of living in legal limbo, doing hard or oppressive work they are sometimes overqualified for, and sometimes risk their physical integrity just to set foot on this country. Min Sook Lee has dealt with these issues in films such as *El Contrato*³⁹ and *Migrant Dreams*.⁴⁰

I want to point out that my interest as an art-based researcher lies in the psychological, personal implications of the migratory experience, and that, as my research progressed, it was made evident that the ideal subject for my research in this sense, was my own migrant self. The subtitle of this thesis is *Reluctant*

³⁹ Lee, Min Sook. "El Contrato [Documentary]." *Canada: National Film Board* (2003).

⁴⁰ Lee, Min Sook. "Migrant Dreams [Documentary]." (2014).

Autoethnography, which is appropriate: to look at my relationship with my loved ones back home was the first into a series of *reluctant* steps towards a better understanding of my own self, migrant or otherwise. In short, to solve the migratory issue was the beginning of solving the *me* issue. At the beginning of this process, I believed my mental health issues were centered on, or even directly caused by my migratory experience. Three years of writing, filmmaking, crisis and therapy, however, revealed that migration was one of multiple strands in the complex fabric of my life.

My issues, as opposed to other migrants', had less to do with external factors like oppression or exploitation by dishonest employers, governments, or criminal organizations. Juan Bonilla, migrant or not, had been "exploited and oppressed" for years by his own addiction and mental illness.

How to research and represent my own self, then, in film, if that is who I am talking about? Guillermina Buzio brought to the table the film *Los Rubios* (2013)⁴¹. In it, director Albertina Carri uses an actress to represent herself and ask the tough questions to those in her old neighbourhood who had any connection with her parents, fatal victims of the oppressive Argentinian dictatorship of her childhood. A diversity of media is used in the film to tell the story: straight documentary shots, acted bits, claymation and digital titles. During our discussion, I exposed that during the filmic process it was hard for me to even assume my own self as a filmic subject,

⁴¹ Carri, Albertina. "Los Rubios [Documentary]." Primer Plano Film - Women Make Movies, Argentina - USA, 2003.

much less show my image on camera. Mrs. Buzio suggested *Los Rubios* as an example of how to unravel the filmic self, and I think it is a great contribution. In the case of *A Home Movie*, I actually think my reluctance to appear, at least in principle, is part of the narrative: the first plot point is to discover that the subject here are not the difficult questions that I ask my parents, or the migratory experience in itself. The turning point, at about 20 minutes in, is to finally show my current face on screen, to identify me with the central subject of the film, after exhausting the questions to my parents, and the different emotions I find in the faces of my loved ones. And while resources like those found in *Los Rubios* are pertinent for that film, I believe the straightforward technical simplicity of *A Home Movie*, with straight, untouched shots from a DSLR, iPhone and portable amateur cameras, is one of its strengths. The reluctance in showing my real self, then, is ironically part of an honest representation of my filmic self: at the beginning of the filmic process, I was not ready to be in front of the camera. Then, I was. To pretend otherwise would be dishonest.

b. My migratory experience, fragmentation, and space.

At this point, I want to state the obvious, if only for the sake of full disclosure. This research has to do with my own migratory and personal experience, and while it takes into consideration a number of sociological, psychological and aesthetic considerations, it focuses on my personal motivation, without trying to make blanket statements in terms of migration at large. This is discussed further in the

autoethnography section of this paper.

A key aspect of my migratory and personal experience, and one that I believe transpires to the filmic narrative of *A Home Movie*, is the fragmentation of time and space. As exposed in our thesis defence discussion, the migratory experience can't be seen anymore as a one-sided experience of assimilation, where one leaves place A for place B, and to do so somehow stops "being" A and "completely assimilates to" B. Min Sook Lee brought transnationalism to the table, where the relation with the country left behind is dynamic, and there is a cultural and emotional back-and-forth. Such a model is way more realistic in my point of view, and while in my experience it was important to accept some things are physically left behind, an important part of my growth has been to accept and even rejoice in the ties and support I still obtain from my country of origin, my relationship with my parents, friends and extended family first and foremost.

Such an experience, where memory and communication play a crucial role in the relationship between homelands, is bound to be fragmented. Pieces of my life are left in Ecuador, and in the case of *A Home Movie*, picking up those pieces and somehow place them in the puzzle of my new life was the initial premise, the motivator for my "difficult questions". This fragmentation relates to the variety of spaces where the interviews take place on the movie: in the first few minutes, I want to ask my mom the questions at the beach, but I just don't find the place or the time for it. Then, I find

the time and the space to talk to my dad while stuck in traffic in downtown Quito, Ecuador, almost unsuspectedly. Asking the questions to my wife, on the same beach in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, where talking to my mom was difficult, was pretty straightforward, and I misjudged the depth of her answer until a few years later in the edit room. For my grandmother, the interview happens on our home in Quito, without any preparation, because she wanted to see her grand-grandkids play one last time (in her life) before we came back to Canada. My loved ones' answers, and the images I attach to them via editing, jump back and forward in time, they reminisce, reflect on the present, and imagine a future where the metaphor or the flying bird who may or may not come back to his nest becomes perfect.

c. Next steps for *A Home Movie* and this research.

As expressed in the first section of this addendum, the reveal at the end of *A Home Movie* works for me like a plot point, where the subject of the film is finally shown in front of the camera. Narratively we could either finish the film here, and leave it be a cathartic short film, and an academic experiment.

Or we can be honest, and keep digging.

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Appendix A. The four stages of Culture Shock, as per the Government of Canada.

Stage 1: Happiness and fascination.

Just before or shortly after arriving in Canada you may:

- Have high hopes and expect great things
- Feel this is a very exciting time
- Feel everything is new and interesting
- Feel confident and that you can easily cope with problems and stress
- Tend to focus on what is similar between Canada and the culture and country you come from

Stage 2: Disappointment, confusing feelings, frustration and irritation.

During the first six months you may:

- Feel happy about the challenges you have overcome
- Feel frustrated, confused and disappointed
- Feel very positive one day and very negative the next
- Focus on the differences between yourself and Canadians
- Miss your family and feel no connection to Canada
- Have difficulty going to work or looking for work
- Feel loneliness for your country and loved ones
- Feel guilty about leaving family members behind

Stage 3: Gradual adjustment or recovery.

During this stage of adjustment you may:

- Feel more in control of your life as you gain a better understanding of Canada

- Feel more confident in your language skills
- Gradually get involved in the community
- Have a better understanding of how to adapt to life in Canada
- Have a better sense of what you need to do to get what you want in Canada

Stage 4: Acceptance and adjustment.

During this stage of adjustment you will likely:

- Feel more comfortable in Canada
- Have made some friends and be more involved in your new community
- Understand better how things are done in Canada
- Be studying, planning to return to school or working at better jobs
- Generally feel content about having come to Canada⁴²

⁴² "Adapt to a New Culture." Government of Canada, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Communications Branch. July 20, 2010. Accessed March 8, 2015. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/newcomers/after-life-shock.asp>.

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