

## Narrating Our Stories in Our Own Voices: A Challenge for Intercultural Communications Research

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Translated from Spanish by  
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**Abstract:** Much of the participatory methods as emerging approaches in research with indigenous people concern the adaptation of long-standing modes of ethnographic practices. This article proposes a move from the conventional practices to incorporate the perspective of the subaltern in their own voice, in the modern world. Diverging from attempts to know the Other “impartially,” my proposal seeks to understand the Other as he or she wishes to be known, in our shared space, in order to produce knowledge about our own culture. The research reported here, deals with forms of intervention and tools to investigate an indigenous culture. As an example, the article shares the experience of Wixáritari’s first trip to a city and first contact with photography as a confrontation between the own and the foreign gaze.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, participatory methodologies, indigenous photography

### 1. Introduction

To be truly conscious of ourselves and of our culture, there must exist an Other, for the outward gaze is in fact a powerful mechanism for self-understanding. Ultimately, it is only by saying “I am,” as opposed to “you are,” that we create ourselves and our culture. However, in the public sphere these different Others rarely speak in their own voices. They are imagined only in terms of essential characteristics that create an imaginary Other who merely reproduces the Western discourse.

The Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie (2009) provides a good example how persistent stories reproduce a single truth about the Other. She recalls when her roommate at an American university congratulated her for her command of English (not realizing that English is Nigeria’s official language). Her roommate also asked her about her tribe’s musical preferences and if she had seen a Western stove. Adichie explains that this young woman’s ignorance stemmed from having heard only one story about Africa. The American woman imagined Africa in terms of its “beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner.” Adichie, attempting to imagine what could be a single story of America for a Nigerian woman, creates a hypothetical “single story” —that of the novel *American Psycho*— that would lead readers to think that all young Americans are serial killers. But this does not happen. Because of its economic and cultural power, the United States is able to disseminate

multiple stories that contribute to describing a diverse country.

In this sense, it is impossible to address single stories without mentioning power. For the hegemonic West, producing an external Other always serves to construct an inferior “Non-West.” Stories of colonialisms and neocolonialisms, of borders that differentiate between the legitimate and the illegitimate, confirm this. We label the Other as different as opposed to what is “normal,” attributing characteristics to the Other that “normal” subjects do not appear to possess. In doing so, we create hierarchies that subjugate the Other to an unequal position in our shared space.

Without a doubt, simplifying and labeling the Others also destroys them and excludes them from political participation on their own terms. But here I want to emphasize that by not listening to the voice of the many Others that we are, we also impoverish thought and the production of new knowledge. Restricting ourselves to a single “word” —that is, a story with limited meaning— limits knowledge. It is only by learning the Other’s words, struggling against labels and official stories, that we can generate the creative action of human thought.

In this regard, it is naive to believe that the dominant “word” corresponds to the empirical world. The words to narrate the world are multiple (in the more than 6000 existing languages), and each one points out a fragment of the truth of that reality. The well-known example of the 60 Inuit words for “white” makes us doubt our own knowledge of the color white. The more words or more stories that we possess, the more complete the human puzzle becomes. As the diversity of languages and stories disappears, we run the risk of distancing ourselves from knowledge in general.

However, considering the current homogenizing cultural pressures and the imminent disappearance of Others as their own narrators, I want to focus on our work as communications researchers. I wonder, in light of the stereotypes that pepper our language and discipline our gaze, what do we truly know about the Other in the field of communications? By erasing the Others’ narrative voices from our research, what do we learn about ourselves? Thinking of the tendency of cultural cloning, I wonder what we learn with the tools of conventional science, and what other ways we might do research.

There is little interest in the subject in communications research. Other than considering subjects as receptors, consumers or voters, where is their agency? From a social sciences perspective, who can speak and who cannot? Is it necessary to speak for them? Research for them? Kishore Mahbubani (1998) ironically titled his book *Can Asians Think?*, reclaiming the value of his own voice in opposition to the dominant voice of Western civilization. In the same way, many indigenous peoples demand to be heard in their own voices that narrate from their own world perspective.

I do not offer this critique because Western technologies and methodologies have not sufficiently advanced. On the contrary, I think that this particular apparatus has given all that it can give. The more we pursue the subject, transforming him or her into the object of study, with experimental procedures and data suction techniques, the more falsification strategies, evasion and disguise the Other invents.

On the other hand, the decontextualized discourses we are accustomed to in the social sciences are little more than constructed data about subjects that only seem to speak for themselves. When we obscure the “you” to whom these discourses are addressed, we reveal

more about the researcher's voice than about the voice of the researched. Geertz (1973, pp. 452-453) put it this way:

The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. There are enormous difficulties in such an enterprise, methodological pitfalls to make a Freudian quake, and some moral complexities as well [...] But to regard such forms as "saying something of something," and saying it to somebody, is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them.

Incidentally, despite his criticisms, Geertz' stories about the Others in his own texts are material collected from subjects who do not appear telling their stories to the anthropologist, nor does Geertz' own voice in the discourse about the Other appear as "talking to someone."

In this way, when science sets the subject and the object apart but gives a greater privilege to the subject, it impedes both learning about oneself and about the Other. Diverging from attempts to know the Other "impartially," my proposal seeks to understand the Other as he or she wishes to be known, in our shared space, in order to produce knowledge about our own culture. Baudrillard (2000) expresses the difficulty of tackling this sort of research when he writes, "never has science postulated, even as science fiction, that things discover us at the same time that we discover them, [...] We always thought that things were passively waiting to be discovered, in much the same way that America is imagined to have been waiting for Columbus." (p. 76) With this in mind, two ideas guide my research: that a single story told by a single narrator is only a fragment of knowledge of the Other, and that the self-narrated stories of the Others also allow us to better know our own culture.

## 2. My Proposal

The project *Entre Voces* [*Between Voices*] deals with the way we express our own reality from our own perspective. For me, doing research has transformed into *kenem+ reitieniet+ yeika*, a Wixárika<sup>1</sup> concept that approximates the verb "to research" that literally means, "As I understand it." In constructing the object of study and selecting methods to put into practice, we redefine "scientific rigor" to mean privileging the production of subjects narrating in their own voices and observing different voices in dialogue and in conflict.

My work with the Wixárika people over the past 15 years has led to forming a group of indigenous Wixáritari educators and *mestizo*<sup>2</sup> professors who together have developed and

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: The words *wixárika* and *wixáritari* refer to an indigenous group living in Western Mexico, specifically in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Durango and Zacatecas. While Spanish-speaking Mexicans often refer to them as *huicholes*, in this group's own language, they call themselves *wixáritari* (plural) or *wixárika* (singular).

<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: The Spanish word *mestizo*, literally meaning "of mixed race," here refers to Spanish-speaking Mexicans of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry.

published texts describing several methodological proposals. The central tenet of this research seeks to define indigeneity on indigenous terms and “Western-ness” from the *mestizo* point of view, the idea being to put these visions in conversation and to point out the conflicts generated from these contrasting visions. We have applied this double perspective in a number of different projects: a textbook for the Huichol culture course where teaching methods dealing with memory and writing are put into practice (Salvador and Corona-Berkin, 2002), a book of photographs taken by the Huichol (*Wixárika*) themselves (Corona-Berkin, 2002), an assembly with indigenous educator participants and Western specialists and the theoretical reflection that emerged from this gathering (Corona-Berkin, 2007), and recently, based on a trip to Guadalajara taken by students from the *Centro Educativo Tatutsi Maxakwaxi*<sup>3</sup>, a travel guide written with three narrators: an official voice, a Western voice and an indigenous voice (Pérez-Daniel and Corona Berkin, 2011), as well as a book of photographs of the city taken by young photographers in dialogue with the city (Corona-Berkin, 2011).

The central question that informs these projects is *to find better ways to live together by expressing diversity in terms of equality*. My proposal is committed to horizontality in the process of constructing a research project. I recognize the impact of encounters and conflicts as determinants of the relationships between different people, materials, languages and translations.

For the sake of brevity, here I will focus on one example, a sampling of photographs taken by Wixáritari students in their first visit to a city and their first experience with a camera, as a provisional way of confronting the challenges of research in intercultural communication. For a more complete discussion, including the photographs themselves, see Sarah Corona Berkin. (2011). Several photographs are included in the present paper as an Appendix.

Prior to this trip, the 31 students from the *Tatutsi Maxakwaxi* school had never visited the city of Guadalajara. Some of them had visited rural towns like Huejuquilla, Mezquitic and Colotlán. The population of these towns barely exceeds 17,000, and they are located in the poorest region of the state of Jalisco. They offer limited urban services, and their buildings are modest. Additionally, 20 of the students had never traveled beyond their mountain community of 326 inhabitants.

As a part of the experience, upon the students’ arrival in Guadalajara, I distributed 31 single-use cameras, each with 27 shots available. For this project, it was important that the cameras were theirs and not “borrowed,” the idea being that no intermediating voice would intervene in the process. I instructed the students in the technical use of the camera, but not in framing or in the Western aesthetic. I encouraged them to photograph the city as “researchers.” At the end of the trip, I collected the cameras, developed the film and returned a copy of the prints to each young photographer; I kept another copy for the project archive. When I returned the pictures to the students, I asked each photographer what he or she had intended to capture in each image, and whether the picture had turned out as he or she had hoped.

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<sup>3</sup> *Tatutsi Maxakwaxi*, the first Wixárika junior high school or *secundaria* (grades 7-9) was founded in 1995 in San Miguel Huaixtita, located in the Sierra Huichola in Jalisco. The curriculum consists of official materials from Mexico’s *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Ministry of Public Education) and other materials.

This method stands in contrast to visual anthropology, where the photograph is used to corroborate the presence of distinct Others and as an auxiliary tool for a meticulous field description, which is itself the objective of the discipline. It also differs from the work of recognized indigenous artistic photographers who, while they reveal their own perspective, it is that of the individual author. On the other hand, in this research project, using the photograph, the idea is to reach autonomy and knowledge of the self and of the Other in both our own voices and in their own voices. Here, I will discuss travel photography, one of the topics I analyzed to study the students' photographs.

### 3. Travel Photography

The manual *Travel Photography: A Guide to Taking Better Pictures*, published by Lonely Planet (I'Anson, 2004), offers advice to help readers "make the most" of the photographic opportunities that present themselves. Subjects listed in the table of contents include people, landscapes, cities, special events, markets, sunrises and sunsets, moving subjects, wildlife and photographs taken from the air. These settings correspond to experiences likely to be included in a tourist's itinerary.

The photography manual covers only some topics and in this way, demarcates what is visible to the Western tourist. In other words, the guide "solemnizes," in the words of Bourdieu, what is "solemnizable" in photographic culture. The common tourist-as-photographer inevitably captures images that were already established before he or she released the shutter. The author of *Travel Photography* indicates that there are "emblematic places," "interesting moments" and "attractive shots," and the travel photographer should be ready to capture them. Guidebooks, travel agencies, brochures, posters, television shows and illustrated books all collaborate in shaping the globalized touristic gaze.

In fact, the complex organization of tourism ultimately determines how we photograph famous sites. In *Travel Photography*, the author observes:

Every country has buildings on its 'must see' list. The Taj Mahal, Machu Picchu, the Great Wall, the Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower...places whose image is already deeply etched in our mind's eye years before we visit them. These sites are photographed millions of times a year by visitors from all over the globe and printed in books, magazines and brochures, on postcards, tea towels, cups and place mats. If you want a real challenge, set yourself the double task of taking pictures of famous places that are as good as the published images, and then create a different photograph to those you've seen before (Richard I'Anson, 2004, p. 188).

What the author fails to recognize is that the camera itself limits what can be photographed. The single lens, like a Cyclops, focuses the gaze on one, decontextualized point. In this way, the camera assigns meaning to the world by creating visual "centers." In other words, photographic choice is not totally in the photographer's hands, nor completely determined by the finger that releases the shutter. The technology itself partially dictates what goes into the picture.

In particular, in the Wixáritari students' photos we see some important sites in Guadalajara

that, though the students were unaware of them before the trip, appear repeatedly in the group's pictures. But the young photographers discover the technology's limits when they see the printed images, and the centralized and decontextualized results are not what they hoped to capture: "it came out so-so because you can't see all of [the fountain], I wanted the upper part to show up," "not everything came out, and you can't see at all how [the bear] was swimming," "I wanted the photo to reveal up to there," "I wanted the whole house but it didn't all show up."

Another imposition in the Wixáritari students' photographs comes from the city and the trip themselves. In the midst of the city's chaos and visual homogeneity, some places stand out. For example, the Wixáritari were not familiar with La Minerva—an iconic monument in Guadalajara that once served as the gateway to the city—as a "must-see" destination. However, commercial postcards of La Minerva and the photographs taken by a student who does not know what the statue represents, are in fact very similar. Ultimately, a traffic circle that radiates outward and concentrates movement from several streets, when captured by a camera that sees with a single eye, can produce only one type of photograph.

On the other hand, the students were fascinated by the fountains, which they had never seen and did not even know what they were called before the trip. To live up to the very allegory of travel photography, the images should "say" everything that the photographers intended. The young Wixáritari do not only document what they have seen, but also they opted for wide shots to capture the whole story that they wish to relate. The Wixáritari photographers' favorite photos are the ones that narrate, for example, the existence of fountains as well as the excess, the wealth and the waste of an extremely scarce resource in the Sierra Wixárika: water. The city is synonymous with modernity, fortune and fountains, its representatives.

Having a photo is, in a way, possessing what is photographed, and it is well suited to the imaginary possession of tourists who travel and want evidence that they were there, of what they saw and what they enjoyed. Their presence in the photo gives authenticity to the trip. The tourist's pose is easily recognizable in the Wixáritari photos; the decisive way to verify that "I was there," is to pose in the center of the photograph, facing the camera. This pose separates and distinguishes the travel experience from everyday life. The pose claims the right to look good, dress up and take center stage. The tourist's pose that these students assumed is radically opposed to the spontaneous or "stolen photo" usually taken *of* them.

There are also experimental poses, poses that imitate and that the photo relays back as if it were a mirror. These "city" poses are identified by the students and, in play, they take turns capturing these portraits of each other.

So far, we have seen the disciplining power of the camera. These students, who had never taken photographs nor traveled as tourists, are nonetheless subjected to the photographic rules that the technology itself and the city impose: the world as focused by the camera and the urban space, and the photo serving both as a souvenir and as evidence. In this sense, they are ultimately anachronistic photographers. But also present is their own gaze, a gaze that is directed in accordance with their own world view. It is this conception of the world that we will discuss in the following section.



#### 4. The Travelers' Photography

The Wixáritari often complain that when tourists visit their communities, they tend to preferentially photograph images of poverty. We notice this tendency even in the work of the earliest photographers to visit the region. Like those photographers, the Wixáritari students also captured the reality of the Others, but in contrast, they photographed its most successful facet: the modern buildings, streets filled with cars, electric cables, industrial construction, and decorative fountains. The students sought to register the differences between their own community and the city: "Since we don't have these in my community, I took a picture of it. I don't know what it is. I liked it."

The Wixáritari students celebrate certain events during the trip, but they are events specifically valued in their culture. Almost 50% of the group's photographs depict buildings, fountains and historic sites like the state capitol, a few monuments and streets full of cars. In this way, we can confirm that urban spaces, splendor and opulence captured their attention.

The photograph that most satisfies these photographers is one that shows the most complete view of the element that caught their attention. Photos taken with full shots generally seem better to them. For these photographers, their greatest frustration stems from the inability to see everything: the impact of the numerous buildings, of large urban spaces or of the height the water reaches as it spurts up in a fountain. In their photos, they seek reality just as they experienced it during their trip, and they are not interested in aesthetic approximations. In contrast to the photography manual, which indicates that the background merely serves as a *mise-en-scène* or frame, the students' shots feature depth of field, surroundings and a low angle. These techniques correspond to their goal of registering the context and its details to narrate exactly what they saw.

*Travel Photography*, in contrast, recommends moving close to the subject and to people's faces, filling the photograph to the edges so that photo is "interesting." In the ultra-visual urban world, we expect photographs to convey different messages. Any photo can be interesting if it looks like something else: advertisers, television, the press and artists do this routinely. For the Wixáritari, photographs should be interesting on their own: the photograph should not do more than reproduce the view of reality that the photographer intended. To these photographers, there are only good and bad photos, depending on whether the photos transmit what the photographers saw and wanted to show.

In this way, the photographs taken by the young Wixáritari of themselves in the city are a way of saying their own "names," of visually narrating themselves as young people simultaneously indigenous and modern. It also shows us how they see us, the urban *mestizos*. What does each photograph contribute as an expression of the photographer's own voice? We understand this contribution as threefold—it creates new knowledge about the political sphere, about indigenous peoples and about the urban West.

I see the **political aspect** of this contribution as the meeting of different groups to resolve a social problem, in this case, that of the excluding labels given to the indigenous. The photographs allow us to distance ourselves from the habit of recognizing indigenous people in a photograph only if they sport an embroidered outfit, or if they are planting seeds, practicing backstrap weaving or carrying heavy loads on their backs. This is the panorama of photographic choices

that we find among professionals, artists, social scientists, journalists, and also among amateur photographers who reproduce this visual narration because it is the only one they know.

That visual story, though, is incomplete. The stereotyped photograph of the indigenous person characterizes that person as an archaic essence, vulnerable and childish. The danger of a homogeneous image, like that of the Western photograph of indigenous people, is that it emphasizes difference and excludes those subjects both from the public space and from politics.

It is important to balance that image with indigenous-authored visual narrations that express different versions of indigenous peoples. In this project, the camera gave the young photographer a new, productive position: here the object, once an observer of the photograph at best, is transformed into a photographer and subject, with new, powerful skills.

As for **indigenous knowledge**, the photographs bring us closer to the facet of themselves that the young Huichols want to show us. The young people in the photographs are well-dressed, healthy, fun, up-to-date. The pleasure of buying shirts and high heels, or drinking soda and eating junk food during the trip to the city, does not make them lose their indigenous identity. What the young photographers appear to say is that their culture is concretely constructed in relation to the Other, in a dynamic process where their own identity is integrated with outside elements that respond to new needs. From their perspective, there is no such thing as half-, contaminated-, and much less endangered Wixáritari.

In relation to **Western urban knowledge**, the photographs allow us to see our own space as mere empty scenery. When it is not loaded with our own, personal stories, urban myths and national symbols, the city is only a modern infrastructure filled with cables, streets, buildings, speed bumps, signals, stoplights, parking meters, cars ... People are not of interest, and we do not observe a need to register them. The pedestrian that crosses the street is not worthy of a photograph unless he has a distinct appearance. The students commented about their photographs: "We had never seen a person sitting in a wheelchair," "the lady didn't interest me, it was her heels...later, I bought some for myself," and "those people were hugging each other for a long time and they stayed that way, that was all they did."

They took their photographs with open frames, where the surroundings are fundamental for understanding the context in which things happen. The absence of close-ups in their images, and their difficulty of finding the horizontal/vertical relationship inside closed spaces, allows us to reconsider our own gaze, disciplined by screens and the urban space. Our photos show fragments of bodies and spaces, and aesthetics prevail over description. They lack context and prioritize human body language.

With all this in mind, how can we find spaces of equality to carry out research in tune with people's own voices? I want to clarify that such spaces are not out there to be recovered—if we look for them, we cannot find them. The equality needed to research with the Other must be put into practice and actively built. As a researcher, I establish an order of discursive equality to produce knowledge together with cooperating voices. In contrast to researching "over the shoulder" of the Other, by multiplying the number of stories narrated by their own protagonists, we work to stave off the extermination of knowledge and to renew the possibility of living and working together with the Other.



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## Appendix





