# Floating Narratives: Transnational Families and Digital Storytelling

Catalina Arango

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Department of Communication

Faculty of Arts

University of Ottawa

Supervisor: Dr. Daniel Paré

**Abstract**

Colombia has some 2.5 million emigrants (KNOMAD 2016), many of whom likely experience diaspora as a state of mind and transnationalism as a feature of their familial interactions. Storytelling constitutes an intersection at which individuals and families create and recreate themselves. Today, much of this process is mediated via information and communication technologies (ICTs). Hence, the central question guiding the thesis is: *How do ICTs catalyze and constrain storytelling within transnational families?* Drawing from information gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six Colombian families with members who immigrated to Canada from Colombia, this thesis investigates the technologically mediated familial interactions and storytelling of 12 adult Colombians residing in Montreal, and six of their respective family members who remain in Colombia. The participants report that prior to migrating their familial stories were mainly oral and occurred in very warm face-to-face situations whereas after migrating their family narratives and stories are being altered in various ways through the presence, interactive, and multimodal affordances ICTs provide.

Key words: *Transnational families, diaspora, information and communication technologies, digital storytelling, presence, interactivity, multimodality.*

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I also wish to express my appreciation to the research participants who shared their experiences and daily lives with me. Their honest participation and input made possible an equally frank description of transnational families and their digital interactions.

I am profoundly grateful to Augusto and Montse for giving me a home to return to after long periods of reading and writing. This thesis would not have been possible without their love and support. Finally, each word in this thesis is dedicated to my mother who gave me the love to follow my dreams and the strength to learn from them.

**Table of Contents**

## List of Tables

## Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in 2015, "3.3% of the world's population lived outside their country of origin."[1] This figure points to a large number of families on the move, a flux of volatile interactions, and a network of long distance communications. Colombians are part of this phenomenon. Colombian migrations coincided with the outbreak of civil war in the 1960s, leading to a wave of qualified and non-qualified workers moving to the United States and Venezuela (Guarnizo 2004). In the 1970s, a substantial group of Colombians, mostly women, migrated to England to work in temporary jobs with cleaning companies, hotels, and restaurants. The next exodus of Colombians occurred in the 1980s and 1990s when many private companies went bankrupt as a result of the neoliberal reforms imposed by the government and the growth of drug trafficking.[2] With the United States having closed its doors to Colombian immigrants, Venezuela, Ecuador, Canada, Europe (Spain in particular), and Mexico became favoured destinations for Colombian migrants during this period. The most recent wave of migration out of Colombia is ongoing and is largely comprised of both people with high levels of education, and those from marginalized sectors of Colombian society. According to the Global Knowledge

[1] See, http://www.unfpa.org/migration

[2] During this period the successive governments imposed a structural adjustment economic strategy imposed by the International Monetary Fund the results of which included a worsening of the country's economic downturn, a rise in authoritarian political practices, continued civil unrest, and growth of both the informal economy and drug trafficking. See: Gutiérrez Sanín (2010); Barón & Meisel (2004); Catanzaro (1998); Echavarría (2000); Higginbottom (2005).

Partnership on Migration and Development more than 2.5 million Colombians (5.19% of the country's total population) lived abroad in 2013 (KNOMAD, 2016).[3]

This figure suggests that emigration is a crucial element of Colombia's complex sociocultural landscape. A number of analyses have examined the political, economic, and social impacts of this mobility for Colombia and Colombians (see, for example, Ciurlo, 2012; Cárdenas & Mejía, 2006; Colombia Nos Une, 2004). Others have examined transformations of inner structures, roles, and dynamics of families within the context of Colombian international migration activities (Rivas Rivas & Gonzálvez, 2008; Ciurlo, 2012). The relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and storytelling as a practice of communication within transnational Colombian families, however, remains relatively unexplored terrain. This is the issue that the thesis investigates.

### 1.1 Theoretical Foundations

The argument advanced in this thesis is rooted in the idea that family is a social system in which individuals redefine their bond through their own interactions (Turner & West, 2002). It follows, therefore, that through narratives, stories, and the practice of storytelling itself families find a way to account, share, redefine and transform their own experiences. This perspective is anchored in both the symbolic interaction approach to understanding family communication, and the notion of social construction, which views families as co-constructing their social realities through interactions and conversations.

[3] Colombian governmental organizations such as the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) and Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores provide rough estimates of the number of Colombians residing abroad. However, obtaining official figures about Colombian migrants has always been a difficult task. See, for example, Cárdenas & Mejía (2006) who discuss this issue.

It has long been recognised that families of immigrants experience a diasporic state of mind (Vertovec, 1997) while practicing transnational interactions and building transnational social fields (Roudometof, 2005). This thesis adopts the definition of transnational families provided by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002). These authors describe transnational families as collective entities who, despite living at a distance some or most of the time, remain linked while building some sort of "collective welfare and unity" (p. 3) that helps them to navigate between different national borders.

To date, analyses of family storytelling as a communication practice have been largely limited to 'traditional' moments in which families communicate, such as: everyday face-to-face conversations (see Deroche, 1996), dinner talks (see Blum-Kulka, 1997) and special events – such as celebrations or gatherings – in which traditional stories are shared (see Marvin, 2004). This thesis seeks to interrogate a somewhat different landscape. When transnational families engage in processes of communication using ICTs, they seemingly traverse intricate domains of social engagement. In this context, oral language is important, but it is not the sole manner through which family narrates itself. Other modes of communication come into play including, online chats, videos, emoticons, audio messages, and digital photo albums. Voice is only one part of the multimodal constellation of available communication resources at one's disposal. Consequently, new forms of presence may be fostered along with new modes of interactive communication. Hence, a concern with technological affordances constitutes a core element of this thesis.

The concept of affordances offers a means of understanding technologies "as artifacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 441). Three technological affordances are

linked to digital storytelling. The first is presence. It is understood as the "'illusion of nonmediation' [that] occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in his/her communication environment and responds as he/she would if the medium were not there" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997, n.p.). The second is interactivity. It occurs when the perceptor is no longer mute because s/he also interprets, participates, interacts, becomes emitter, and creates her/his own messages (Brea, 2007). The third affordance is multimodality. It refers to the incorporation of a variety of multimodal compositions and formats such as voice, music, text, graphics, and still or moving images into communicative processes (Lundby, 2008, p. 8).

In helping individuals overcome the communicative barriers created by vast geographical distances, ICTs seemingly provide the social space where members of transnational families can maintain their communication on a daily basis as well as explore diverse modes and interactive alternatives to express their affection and common history. Storytelling, then, emerges as a crucial nexus at which families create and recreate themselves and their realities. Understood in this manner, it seems plausible that family narratives and stories may be altered through the diverse affordances of ICTs.

The pervasiveness of transnational family storytelling in online spaces raises questions about the ways in which these narratives are created using digital processes, whether and how family stories might be changing, and the cultural, economic, political, and social implications of this emergent practice. With this in mind, the central question guiding this thesis is: *How do ICTs catalyze and constrain storytelling within transnational families?*

In addressing the latter question, the argument advanced in this thesis transcends some of the dominant perspectives in family communication research insofar as it actively

distances itself from forms of methodological nationalism in which the nation-state is understood as the starting point for determining communicational practice among diasporic communities. In addition, the argument advanced in the pages that follow extends beyond the traditional view of migration that conceives this phenomenon as being foremost a process of assimilation, integration, and/or adaptation. Hence, issues of transnational interactions, social fields, and fluid narratives are guiding interests for the research presented.

### 1.2 Colombian Families

There are two reasons why studying Colombian transnational families is relevant to the analysis of family communication and transnational interactions. Firstly, Colombia leads the World Bank's rankings of emigration among South American countries (2013 data), and is the top source of refugees (2014 data) from South America (KNOMAD, 2016).[4] According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, in 2014, Colombians comprised the largest group of both permanent residents and government–assisted refugees from South America residing in Canada.[5] Tracking the consequences of mobile lifestyles at micro levels (i.e., familial realms) may contribute to understanding the new social meanings and interactions Colombians are building.

Second, Colombian families seem to have a particular feature that facilitates the task of studying familial digital communication. According to Puyana et al. (2009, p. 103), Colombians have a social representation of themselves that is based on the "familyhood"

[4] See, http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data> and <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1199807908806/4549025-1450455807487/Factbookpart1.pdf>

[5] See, http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2014/permanent/10.asp

(*"familismo"* in Spanish). This is the tendency to idealize family as the only center of the emotional life. A guiding hypothesis of this thesis, and one that is rooted in the fact that I am of Colombian origin, is that this particular sense of *familismo* may foster more frequent interactions at a distance among Colombian transnational families which, in turn, may encourage the practice of digital storytelling.

### 1.3 The Fieldwork

In order to address the central research question guiding this thesis – *How do ICTs catalyze and constrain storytelling within transnational families?* – I investigate the digital storytelling practices of six Colombian families with members residing in Canada and Colombia. A total of 18 people participated in the empirical component of the study; 12 adults living in Montreal, and six who remain in Colombia and who regularly use ICTs to maintain contact with their family counterparts in Canada.

These research participants comprise a convenience sample. Although convenience sampling cannot claim to be representative of the general population, it is able to provide researchers with what Weiss (1994, p. 26-27) labels "responders' own assessments of generalization." In other words, the participants in this research exercise are able to comment on the extent to which others perceive, experience, and/or behave likewise in similar situations. The non-generalizability of the findings arising from this thesis is not considered to be problematic because the current research undertaking is essentially a pilot study whose findings are intended for use as a basis for informing a future larger study investigating the topic at hand.

In order to collect the data required to answer the central research question, a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with members of the participant families during August and September 2015. The interviews were characterized by a conversational tone wherein the participants described their experiences and daily practices while simultaneously representing and interpreting the ways in which the technologies they use inform and constrain their digital storytelling practices. Once the interviews were completed, three of the participating families granted me, at their own behest, access to more intimate digitally mediated familial interactions. This access consisted of: (i) one family carrying on with a post-interview Skype-based family conversation that they permitted me to observe; and (ii) two other families granted me access to their families' WhatsApp chat groups for a period of one week. The information gleaned from the WhatsApp chat logs was a natural complement to the information gathered from the interviews.

### 1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into six chapters. This introductory chapter has provided a brief background and context for the research project. The discussion in the second chapter sets out the theoretical foundations of the thesis. The issues examined include the contrast between operational and relational approaches to defining family; notions of diaspora and transnationalism; perspectives regarding the situating of technology as part of a complex dynamic of domestication and as a social space, and the way(s) in which stories, narratives, and storytelling are understood in the realm of family communication studies. The chapter wraps up with a discussion of technological affordances and a reiteration of the central research question guiding this thesis.

The discussion in chapter three consists of two main parts. The first presents the methodological approach employed to undertake the research for this thesis and the techniques used to collect and analyze the data. This is followed by a reflection statement focusing on issues affecting my interpretation of the collected data.

The findings obtained during the fieldwork portion of the study are presented and analyzed in the chapters four and five. The discussion in Chapter 4 deals with the research findings regarding the participants' views about pre-migration storytelling within their respective families. In Chapter five, the dynamics of communication and storytelling of post-migration are presented.

The sixth chapter is the conclusion. Here, the overall findings of the thesis are summarized and the research question is answered in the light of these findings. In essence, two conclusions emerge. First, ICTs catalyze family storytelling in situations when presence is experienced or new multimodal forms of communication are explored. Second, ICTs constrain family storytelling in situations when the technology is seen as an obstacle that disrupts the connection between here and there as well as in situations when extractive interactivity cannot be practiced by everyone. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the limitations of this thesis and an outline of possible avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2: Of Transnational Families and Digital Stories: Building a Theoretical Map

To understand how ICTs catalyze and/or constrain storytelling within transnational families, concepts from different bodies of literature were brought together to establish a framework. The goal of this exercise was not to test specific concepts or theories but rather to establish a conceptual and analytical lens for examining the relationships between transnationalism, family communication and storytelling as they pertain to the central research question guiding this thesis. The citing of both relatively dated and contemporary sources in chapter reflects this intention:

With regard to the concept of transnationalism, the work of Levitt & Glick Shiller (2004), and Roudometof (2005) presents ideas that align well with notions of liminality, the state of ambiguity, openness, and fluidity advanced by more contemporary authors (e.g. Karraker, 2013; Cabanes & Acedera, 2012) share regarding the migrant experience. This more contemporary work tends to focus on case studies of such things as the post-migration transformation of family structures (see, for example, Karraker, 2013) or the impact of migration on parent-child relationships (see, for example, Cabanes & Acedera, 2012).

In terms of family communication, I have drawn from the ideas of Pearson (1993) who defines family as a transactional group, and Yerby (1998) who describes family as a social system. Equally useful for the purposes of this thesis is the work of Peñaranda Colera (2010) advances the points to the importance of accounting for the dynamics of communication between family members and the permanent use of ICTs when examining processes of "transnational coexistence" among families.

When it comes to storytelling, Barthes (1977) work on narratives and Sanchez-Carretero (2002) writing that set narratives in the context of transnational families was

particularly helpful in enabling me to build a coherent interpretation of the elements of storytelling.

This chapter is divided into six sections. The first sets out the definition of family from the operational and the relational perspectives. This is followed by an examination of the notions of diaspora and transnationalism. In the third section, technology is discussed as fostering a mediating social space that transnational families experience in their daily lives. In the fourth part, the definitions of stories, narratives, and storytelling are discussed. The fifth section focuses on presence, interactivity, and multimodality as technological affordances. The final section concludes by reiterating the central research question guiding this study.

## 2.1 Defining Families

Defining family is inherently problematic because the complex spirit of 'the family' is based on intimate subjectivities, emotional interactions, and power structures. According to Floyd *et al.* (2006), there are two dominant approaches to defining family. One is the operational view. It focuses on identifiable relationships, family types, and familial communication processes such as conflict, intimacy, and power, as well as models of family organization. The operational view includes structural elements and processes constituting families (e.g., genetic associations, legal ties, child development) as well as discrete relationships such as marriage and parenting. The second, or relational, approach is conceptual. Family, here, is understood as both a transactional group whose members exchange meaning (Pearson, 1993), and a social system in which people bond around a common living space and history (Yerby *et al.*, 1998. When portrayed in this light family consists of a self-determined group of

individuals who permanently redefine their bond to one another through their own interactions (Turner & West, 2002). Put simply, the relational perspective understands family as being constituted in interaction and communication.

Bearing in mind the need to distinguish between defining the family as it is versus defining the family as it should be (Floyd *et al*., 2006), Stamp (2004) posits that family is a social construct that is based on social interactions, emotional attachments, symbolic elaborations, and defined structures. The work of Fitzpatrick & Caughlin (2002) and Wamboldt & Reiss (1989), for instance, contributed to the advancement of three conceptual lenses for defining family relations. The first is a socio-legal lens that illustrates why family relations should carry legal recognition. Second is a biogenetic lens that focuses on the reproductive and genetic component of family. The third, or role lens, emphasizes emotional attachments and patterns of interaction occurring within families. It understands family as being defined by how people feel and behave, with communication creating the social world including family practices in which the senses of home and identity are crafted (Floyd *et al.*, 2006).

The study of family communication relies on four perspectives: (i) symbolic interactionism; (ii) systems; (iii) dialectics; and (iv) developmental approaches (Sabourin, 2004, p. 43). According to the symbolic interaction perspective, individuals define themselves through social relations with others. Under the frame of symbolic interactionism, social constructivism "suggests that family members co-construct their social realities through conversation" (Galvin *et al.*, 2004, p. 69). As a result, stories, narratives, and storytelling emerge as prominent elements within family communication with particular

attention given to "the social dimension of meaning making in relationships" (Sabourin, 2004, p. 47).

The system perspective views the self as being completely immersed in the familial relationship, with individuals having neither meaning nor autonomy outside of familial relationships (Sabourin, 2004, p. 45). The dialectical approach likewise maintains that, "self and other can be viewed only as connected polarities, and neither would exist in isolation" (Sabourin, 2004, p. 45). The developmental perspective by contrast focuses on the different stages (e.g. infancy, adolescence) and transitions (e.g. parenthood) that individuals experience in their family lives (Sabourin, 2004, p. 46).

For the purposes of this thesis family is understood through the role lens and is seen as a relational transactional group in which individuals define themselves and their social realities through their relations and conversations with other family members.

### 2.2 In a Diasporic State of Mind and Among Transnational Dynamics

Historically, the term diaspora was rooted in the idea of dispersed ethnic/religious communities, and referred principally to scattered Jewish populations outside Israel (Karim, 2003, p. xvi). Four additional elements are present in older definitions of this term: (i) the idea of commitment to continuity and restoration of a homeland (Cohen, 1997, p. 4); (ii) a sense of displacement; traumatic or otherwise (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010);[6] (iii) a type of consciousness that fosters "the connection to the histories and heritage of the homeland" (Fazal, 2007, p. 35, 36) and creates an awareness of social exclusion and discrimination that

[6] According to Vertovec (1997), the concept of diaspora tends to have a negative connotation due to its being linked to victimization, alienation, and loss.

gives diasporic communities a sense of union; and (iv) arbitrary lines of division between oneself and the other and ideas of displacement and dislocation that are simultaneously social, cultural and physic (Vertovec, 1997, p. 194).

As a consequence of more recent social constructivist and cultural studies based research into migrant experience, the understanding of diaspora has shifted away from a once heavy reliance on the nation-state frame. Emphasizing a postmodern context in which nation-states no longer mean unbreakable ties, and identities are seen to be detached from physical territories, Vertovec (1997) advances two conceptualizations of diaspora that are crucial within the context of this thesis.[7] The first is 'Diaspora as a Type of Consciousness.' Here, diaspora is understood as an experience, a sense of identity, a state of mind with a paradoxical nature. Central to this notion is the idea of a double consciousness[8] allowing individuals to be simultaneously here and there and to have routes and roots. Seen in this light, diaspora becomes a bridge between the local and the global in which collective memories and new maps of desire and attachment are created and recreated by a multiplicity of communities and selves (Vertovec, 1997).

[7] Some scholars have proposed the concept of Diaspora Space as the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location. Brah (1996), Karim (2003), and Hall (2012), for instance, posit diaspora as a non-physical existential location where paradoxes such as inclusion and exclusion, belonging and otherness are contested.

[8] Instead of hybridity, Ebanda de B'béri (2006, p. 15) proposes Double Consciousness (as conceptualized by Du Bois) because it "illustrates the reflective articulation of the dynamic expression of identity, since the constructive process of one's identity invariably operates as a projection of Otherness, which Du Bois qualifies as a feeling of 'doubleness'". It is the potential of knowing that the other is in ourselves and we are in the Other. It is that mirroring relationship that allows history, everyday experiences, differences, and cultural intersections to emerge. Identities, for these communities of immigrants, do not mean standing roots, specific territories, historical time, and static memories anymore. They imply migrations, mobility, absence of anchors, in other words, moving roots. Those new identities are nourished by fluidity to become a palimpsest of experiences, new horizons of senses (Martínez Ojeda, 2006), and a constant dialog with the other (with Otherness).

The second meaning is 'Diaspora as Mode of Cultural Production.' Linked to this notion is the idea of diaspora as part of a global flow of social and cultural goods and activities. Here, daily life is seen as the fabric where societies are maintained, renewed, and reconstituted. The process is syncretic, creolized, hybrid, heterogeneous (Vertovec, 1997, p. 290). To this end, the confluence of narratives within and without diasporic communities is seen to play an important role because they are the vehicle through which members of these communities share pre-given identities and materialize themselves individually and collectively on a daily basis (Brah, 1996, p. 180).

Transnationalism can be seen as parallel and complementary to the notion of diaspora insofar as it is a phenomenon that "acknowledges the development and sustaining of connections and networks across geographical, cultural, and political borders" (Geogiou, 2007, p. 16).[9] It also involves the sense of liminality: a state of ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy of identity (Huang, *et al.*, 2008, p. 7). Expounding on this notion, Levitt & Glick Shiller (2004, p. 1011) point out that:[10]

> it is more useful to think of the migrant experience as a kind of gauge which, while anchored, pivots between a new land and a transnational incorporation. Movement and attachment are not linear or sequential but capable of rotating back and forth and changing direction over time. The median point on this gauge is not full incorporation but rather simultaneity of connection. Persons change and swing one way or the other

[9] Similarly, the concepts of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism seem to overlap. According to Roudometof (2005) transnationalism is linked to immigrant cohorts and a whole array of activities across borders while cosmopolitanism tends to be used as an ethical standpoint for 21st century global life. In other words, cosmopolitanism is often portrayed as an attitude and a moral and ethical perspective rather than a practice. In general, cosmopolitanism has been conceived as a state of mind or a competence that has to be acquired (Rantanen, 2004, p. 120, 121). For the purpose of this thesis, only diaspora and transnationalism are taken into account when analyzing migrant families living in Montreal and Colombia.

[10] In their summary of the development of the concept of transnationalism Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004) include the description of four distinct traditions: the research done by sociologists and anthropologists in the United States; studies done by the Transnational Community Programme based at Oxford University; a literature on transnational families; and an effort to reformulate notions of space and social structure.

> depending on the context, thus moving our expectation away from either full assimilation or transnational connection but some combination of both.

Roudometof (2005, p. 127) argues that transnationalism involves three different tiers: (i) transnational social spaces; (ii) permanent interactions that take place within transnational social spaces; (iii) and transnational communities.

According to Roudometof, the first tier, transnational social spaces, is comprised of a set of multi-layered and multi-sited social fields that integrate those who move and those who stay behind. Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004) posit that social fields transcend the physical sphere, taking migration into the domain of experience and interaction. This echoes Bash *et al.* (1994)'s claim that although most individuals, communities, or states rarely identify themselves as transnational because their identities remain framed in terms of loyalty to nations and nation-states, it is the definition of nation-states that has changed. They point out that whereas the term nation-state once described a group of people who shared a common culture within a bounded territory, it has come to include citizens who are geographically dispersed and who "remain socially, politically, culturally, and economically [loyal] to the nation-state of their ancestors" (p. 9). Drawing from this notion, Bash *et. al* (1994) lobby to consider transnationalism as a new lens for studying the "lived and fluid experiences of individuals who act in ways that challenge our previous conflation of geographic space and social identity" (p. 8). Seen in this light geographical frontiers and national boundaries are not parameters by which to define social fields. Instead, sharp divisions between local, national, transnational, and global are to be understood as being interpellated. Put simply, in their daily lives individuals may live within the local but simultaneously receive information or ideas from national and the global spheres.

Roudometof's second tier deals with the presence of permanent interactions within social fields. Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004, p. 1011) maintain that in these constant connections there is a complex sense of simultaneity, "between a new land and a transnational incorporation" continuously marking the everyday lives of transnationals. In an effort to understand the significance of different transnational practices, these authors distinguish between *ways of being* within a social field and *ways of belonging* to that social field. Ways of being refer to the social relations and practices through which individuals engage in cross-border connections manifest as regular features of everyday life. Examples include, but are not limited to, such activities as eating certain foods, worshiping certain deities or saints, and having conversations with family members 'back home' as a regular practice without recognizing one's membership in a particular group or unit. Ways of belonging, on the other hand, refers to practices that embrace symbolic and concrete connections to a particular group in which identity is fostered. For example, choosing a particular cuisine, or creating specific family narratives as a way of engaging with and feeling part of the group.

In this thesis the third tier of transnationalism, transnational communities, is investigated by focusing on transnational families. Adhering to Bryceson & Vuorela's definition (2002, p. 3), in this thesis transnational families are understood as,

> living some or most of the time separated from each other, yet holding together and creating something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely 'familyhood', even across national borders.

This said, it must be noted that some critics of transnational family studies contend there has been an over-interpretation of the significance of migrants' conversations with family members back home along with exaggerated findings of transnational connectedness where none exists (see, for example, Heath *et al.*, 2011, p. 3-4). Indeed, some sceptics claim

that not every family of migrants can be described as a transnational family given that many individuals deliberately break their bonds with their country of origin (Parella, 2007, p. 155). While acknowledging this concern, in this thesis families that are immersed in transnational social fields, and who embrace permanent transnational interactions are nonetheless considered to be transnational.

To date, studies of transnational families have largely focused on the post-migration transformation of family structures (see, for example, Karraker, 2013); the impact of migration on parent-child relationships including long-distance parenting practices, satellite kids, migrant mothers or 'astronaut parents' (see, for example, Cabanes & Acedera, 2012); the practice of care among different generations in transnational contexts (see, for example, Parella, 2007); and broader structural inequalities affecting family migration, namely gender, class, and race (see for example, Heath *et al.*, 2011). In terms of transnational Colombian families, the research focus has predominantly centered on the economic impacts of migration (see, for example, Colombia nos Une, 2004; Puyana *et al.*, 2009); the organization of families (structure and dynamics) before, during, and after migration (see, for example, Puyana *et al.*, 2009; Cárdenas & Mejía, 2006); paternity practices (see, for example, Marad Haydar *et al.*, 2011); family communication (see, for example, Puyana *et al.*, 2009); gender dynamics (see, for example, Ciurlo, 2012; Rivas Rivas & Gonzálvez, 2008); and the practice of maintaining long distance affectionate relationships (see, for example, Rivas Rivas & Gonzálvez, 2008; Marad Haydar *et al.*, 2011).

For the purpose of this thesis, diaspora is considered as a context, a framework, a state of mind. Transnationalism, on the other hand, is viewed as a phenomenon with the potential to foster interactions and social fields. With this in mind, the view advanced in this thesis is

that what makes a family transnational is its interactions across vast geographical distances, the social fields its members build, and how members conceive and narrate the family within this context.

### 2.3 ICTs and Transnational Families

Transnational families experience a paradox with members being geographically separated while remaining connected with one another. As Parella (2007, p. 156) notes, migration has always created families in motion, separated or dispersed. ICTs enable family members to more easily continue functioning as families in spite of the physical distances separating them insofar as these technologies facilitate the sharing of frequent conversations, and the building of new narratives. Put simply, the use of ICTs creates and supports patterns of mediated interaction that transnational families interpret as connected relationships (Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012, p. 1431).

Peñaranda Cólera (2010) claims that this sense of connection enhances a transnational coexistence (*con-vivir transnacional* in Spanish), a daily-life exercise and a fabric of practices, dynamics, affections, and meanings that take place when migrants are present without being physically in the same location as other family members. She identifies three practices occurring within relationships characterized as transnational coexistence:

1. Technological proximity. This is a practice through which members of the family seek to overcome geographic distances and get closer to one another, at least symbolically. Listening to the other, seeing each other, and sending gifts from one place to another enables this form of proximity.
2. Connected presence. This is a practice by which family members are felt to be present despite being physically elsewhere. The sense of connected presence is catalyzed through daily ICT-mediated interactions and frequent expressions of care.

3. Incorporated velocity. This practice refers to the rapid circulation of messages between family members that, in turn, enhances the sense of living daily life together despite being physically separated by geography.

As it is evident from the three practices outlined above, the notion of transnational coexistence also encompasses processes of technology domestication,[11] with ICTs becoming integrated into the daily practices of transnational families. As Green (2002, p. 43) points out, "as a technology is domesticated within the household, so the household is correspondingly technologized: this is a two-way street." Domestication comprises four elements. The first, appropriation, refers to both the decision of whether to take a technology into the home, and the action of bringing the object from the store to the home. As Silverstone *et al.* (1992, p. 20) observe, appropriation is linked to negotiations leading to the acquisition of technologies including the media content, computer software, and communication services. Conversion is the second element. It refers, for instance, to the way a computer bridges the home with the outside world. It deals with the way family members mobilize ICTs to present themselves to others. The third element, objectification, relates to the process of assigning a place to the technological object within the home. It involves a transformation of routines and spatial dynamics in the domestic environment. The last element, incorporation, consists of the ways in which technologies are used and blended within the rhythm of the family. It focuses on temporalities and questions about articulations of gender, age differentiation, and assertions of status related to the use of technology (Silverstone *et al.*, 1992, p. 22).

[11] The domestication perspective focuses on the meanings ICTs have for people and the social relationships surrounding them by examining patterns of technology consumption, experience, and use. In the words of Haddon (2011, p. 313), this approach "provides contextual information about households and individuals to better appreciate why they use ICTs in the way they do."

The notion that ICTs contribute to the development of new networks for transmitting information between individuals, creating new forms of action and interaction, as well as new kinds of social relationships, is widely accepted. Expounding on the ways in which emerging media are fostering a new communicative environment, Madianou & Miller (2012, p. 1) advance the term polymedia to describe

> the dramatic change which has revolutionized the way in which families maintain long-distance communication. [It] is the emergence of a plethora of internet- and mobile phone-based platforms such as email, instant messaging (IM), social networking sites (SNS) and webcam via voice over internet protocol (VOIP).

Transnational families, use ICTs for many reasons, including: "to create a form of virtual connectedness that might substitute for physical co-presence" (Wilding, 2006, p. 132), to preserve their identity and engage themselves politically (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 5), to open a series of ubiquitous forms of connectivity that allows them to be in touch anytime, from anywhere, and using multiple channels of communication at the same time (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 5), to build a sense of permanent interaction in which any type of message (e.g., jokes, small comments, news, stories) and many of the routines of the past (i.e., when the family was together) are replicated (Wilding, 2006, p. 132), to generate a shared space and time that "overlooked - even if only temporarily – the realities of geographic distance and time zones" (Wilding, 2006, p. 133).

It is equally important to acknowledge that using ICTs does not guarantee positive emotions and affections not least because some family members may prefer not to use these technologies. Expounding on this notion Wilding (2006, p. 134) points out that,

> although 'connected presence' gives the appearance of the annihilation of distance, it can also result in increased guilt and anxiety when the distance becomes evident again through tragedy. The very real limitations of distance are also clear when someone

> becomes ill and requires personal care. In some circumstances, a telephone call or email is simply not sufficient to show care for kin in need. In some respects, the connections enabled by email and other ICTs are not 'sunny day' technologies. They provide few opportunities for engaging in the personal care that is sometimes required by ageing parents, or for negotiating the conflicts and crises that can erupt as a result of continued interactions.

It is also important to recognise growth in the use of ICTs among migrants and their families is often counterbalanced by the diverse constraints they may encounter including, limited material access to digital technology,[12] inequities in the use of ICTs,[13] and other digital literacy related issues that are linked to the so-called knowledge gap.[14] In sum, "the phenomenon of the digital divide among diasporic or transmigrant communities implies not only disparities of income level, gender, ethnicity, education, language, generation and geographical location, but also the social distribution of knowledge, power and network capacity in the information society." (Benitez, 2006, p. 185).

### 2.4 Family Storytelling as a Communication Practice

In addition to considering factors influencing the ways in which transnational families experience transnational interactions and build new social fields, it is also necessary to

[12] The issues of access to digital technology are commonly referred to as the digital divide. This concept was initially defined as the gap between those who did and those who did not have physical access to digital technology (initially personal computers and the internet) (Alam & Imran, 2015; See also, Mossberger, 2012).

[13] The "second level digital divide" comprises gender, income, generation, ethnic, family, language, geographic location (i.e., urban versus rural areas) and disability gaps (See for example, Alam & Imran, 2015; Castells, 2002)

[14] In the words of Castells (2002), "Internet-based learning is not only a matter of technological proficiency… The critical matter is to shift from learning to learning-to-learn, as most information is on-line, and what is really required is the skill to decide what to look for, how to retrieve it, how to process it, and how to use it for the specific task that prompted the search for information. In other words, the new learning is oriented toward the development of the educational capacity to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into action" (pp. 258, 259).

examine perspectives regarding the ways in which transnational families narrate themselves. The symbolic interaction view of family communication posits that individuals define themselves through relations with significant others, and the act of sharing and creating meanings to give sense to the world (Sabourin, 2004, p. 47). Under this frame, there are three prominent elements of family communication. The first is stories that may be understood as narrative units that are told and retold. The second is narratives that can be seen as general systems within which stories orbit. The third element, storytelling, can be defined as a communication practice that puts both narratives and stories in motion thereby enabling families to create and recreate themselves.

Stories "are accounts of experience" (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 529). As they are told and retold, stories establish an almost immortal bond with time. They are remembrances of the past that are embodied and shared in the present and then projected into the future. Using family stories, individuals interpret and solidify meanings that are attached to family experiences (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). They are the way family members interpret and transmit their collective experiences.

Drawing from Labov & Waletzky's (1967) definition of stories,[15] Langellier & Peterson (2004) argue that a story should have a full plot, including a beginning, middle, and end. Among family stories there are three dominant categories of stories. The first are canonical stories. These privilege acceptable, traditional, and normative forms and elaborations of family that are fixed in cultural structures. They are told in the present,

[15] Labov and Waletzky posit that a classic family story should include: (i) an abstract with the main elements of the story, (ii) an introduction that builds the scene and characters, (iii) the development of the events, (iv) the event's resolution, (v) a coda that summarizes the story and (vi) a conclusion that often provides a moral to the story.

justifying events that happened in the past (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 112). They carry a heavy ideological load because it is through these stories that institutions and norms are preserved (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 525). There are three genres of canonical stories: (i) courtship in which heterosexual love, romance, and marriage is reinforced (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 525); (ii) birth which is set up as the origin of the individual in family terms, her/his conception, birth, and first years of life; and (iii) survival stories by which children are taught to survive in a very hostile world. It is through the latter that family members are seen to frame the difference between themselves and others (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 527).

The second category is popular stories. These express cultural ideals, as well as meanings and values that are treasured by many (Sabourin, 2004, p. 49). Popular stories reflect the influence of the mainstream media on private life. According to Jorgenson & Bochner (2004, p. 527) such stories,

> are received passively and eventually become part of what we take for granted in performing or doing family. On this account, many of the meanings we think we make and live ourselves may actually be chosen for us, not by us.

However, these authors also acknowledge that families are not merely passive entities influenced by media stories. To this end they recognize that individuals resist, contest, and adapt popular stories before incorporating them into their inventory. As Jorgenson & Bochner (2004) put it,

> Often we seek to define ourselves by stories of our own making, stories that conflict with or deviate from the expected, normative, or conventional. Indeed, much of the work of personal narrative and family storytelling involves mitigating the constraints of canonical and cultural conventions (p. 527 – 528)

Stories on the margin align with this latter perspective and comprise the third story type. Jorgenson & Bochner (2004) describe these as stories that do not fit into the canon. They take into account family experiences that have been silenced, including, for example, social taboos or topics such as "marital rape, childlessness, unexpected pregnancies, as well as sexuality, alcoholism, and abuse" (Sabourin, 2004, pp. 49-50). Such stories are not easy to confront, challenge preconceived notions of normal, natural, and functional, and force family members "to make room for variance, competing moral claims, difficult decisions, blows of fate, perverse realities, and human differences" (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 530).

The second element of family communication that allows families to define themselves is narratives. For Eastmond (2007), for example, the definition of narratives and stories seem to overlap; no difference can be tracked between the two notions. However, others such as Barthes (1977, p. 79) add a different level of complexity by arguing that,

> Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances — as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting … stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation… narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.

Not exempted from conceptual tensions, MacIntyre (1981), Burke (1945), Geertz (1980), and Turner (1982) consider narrative as the most typical form of social life that has repercussions both in the individual and social realm. For the individual, the importance of narrative is linked to the idea that "in order to understand their own lives people put them into narrative form — and they do the same when they try to understand the lives of others"

(Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004, p. 5). At the social level, the exploration and understanding of the repertoire of legitimate stories and their evolution is seen as crucial to understanding a society or some part thereof (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004, pp. 5, 6). In other words, narratives constitute part of the process of enculturation in which young people are lead to find "meaning to their lives by relating them to the legitimate narrative of the society to which they belong" (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004, p. 5).

It follows, therefore, that if stories are understood as acts of meaning in which an experience is told, narratives may be defined as repertories, ensembles, or systems of stories. Narrative refers to both a story and its telling (Garvis, 2015, p. 2). The power of narrative lies in the connections between stories and the way they are organized and shared. They become "the process of reflection and self-interpretation in the negotiation of identity… a narrative provides a framework of intelligibility in which we are actively engaged" (Frie, 2011, pp. 48, 49).

In addition, narratives also constitute sets of procedures for life making insofar as they are constructions of human imagination reflecting culture and identity. These sets of stories are continuously transformed, created, recreated, expressed, and performed in an attempt to reproduce the flexibility of the self and the other. According to Sanchez-Carretero (2002, p. 2) narratives are "the linking threads that make it possible to maintain communication in the diaspora."

The third element of family communication that families use to define themselves is storytelling. It may be understood as a communication practice that sets both stories and narratives in motion. In the view of Langellier & Peterson (2006, p. 110) storytelling is a fundamental way of doing family insofar as the practice of creating, performing, sharing, and

transmitting stories, rituals, conversations, and routines of daily comings and goings give life to family.

The study of storytelling is a fundamental part of family communication research and often is approached through the lens of narrative performance theory (see, for example, Langellier & Peterson, 2004, and Langellier, 2002, 1999). Narrative performance theory sees family storytelling as an act (most of the time a speech act), event and discourse entailing "an embodied struggle in specific material conditions, under multiple discursive conventions, and with complex political consequences" (Langellier & Peterson, 2006, p. 109). It approaches storytelling in relation to its performance and performativity.[16] Performance focuses attention on the "varieties of stories families tell and the varieties of ways in which they tell them" (Langellier & Peterson, 2006, p. 100). It involves the embodiment context, situational and material constraints on storytelling (i.e., the resources, material conditions, economic and cultural resources storytelling draws upon and mobilizes), and the discursive regularities of the performing narrative (i.e., the principles and norms governing the internal formation of discourse) (Langellier & Peterson, 2004b, p. 8, 13, 18-19). Examining performativity complements the performance focus, by analyzing the meanings of performance, the complexities and effects of discursive practices, and their ability to constitute identity and experience (Langellier, 1999, p. 128, 129).

[16] Finch (2007) critiques notions of performance and performativity, favouring the notion of display that she defines as the process by which individuals share and transmit to relevant others the way they do things to establish family relationships. She maintains that the concept of performance is inadequate for the analyzing family-like nature of relationships because it is more strongly related to individual identity than social interactions, and because it implies "a clear distinction between actor and audience" (p. 76). She also claims that the idea of performance suggests face-to-face contact while display entails something broader.

Viewing storytelling through the lens of narrative performance theory also highlights the parallel between storytelling and the practice of narrative talk. Framing the difference between narrative and non-narrative talk is not exempt from controversy but there are four commonly agreed upon differences between these concepts:

1. Narrative and non-narrative talk constitute two distinctive ways of interacting with reality. According to Bruner (1986, 1990), narrative talk is a way of interpreting reality and experiences while pragmatic or non-narrative talk is a way of reporting reality, truth and rationality. As Georgakopoulou & Goutsos (2000, p. 67) put it, "narrative (re)creates or (re)constructs reality, while non-narrative displays it through a model of verifiable (analytic and synthetic) relations."

2. Narrative and non-narrative talk have opposite temporal logics. Narrative talk has a double temporality: one external that emerges during the presentation or performance of the story, and another internal that corresponds to the time of the plot. Non-narrative talk, on the other hand, does not have an internal temporality. Its "underlying structures are static or atemporal, whether synchronic or diachronic" (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2000, p. 71).

3. Narrative and non-narrative talk have different structures. Whereas narrative talk focuses on introduction, development and resolution of the plot, "non-narrative [talk], as a rule, revolves around a problem (with its related effects and causes), its solution and evaluation …, or, alternatively, around an argument, which requires explanation, proof, or refutation" (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2000, p. 73).

4. Narrative and non-narrative talk differ on their expressive devices. "Narrative seems to be prototypically associated with subjectivity, affectivity, and imageability, but non-narrative with processes of information giving, analysis, and rationalization" (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2000, p. 73).

McFeat (1974), on the other hand, approaches family storytelling through the lens of families as small-group cultures who perform themselves to themselves, and to others, by doing things with words. According to this view, families tell stories both as part of celebrations or rituals (e.g., holidays, birthdays, reunions, and funerals) and as part of conversations and habits of daily life while doing the most ordinary tasks (e.g., eating meals,

traveling from school or work to home, doing homework or housework). Seen through this lens, storytelling is the way families articulate who they are during their daily life activities.

McFeat (1974) maintains that storytelling may be understood as using three levels of ordering to make sense of family sensibilities: (i) task ordering, (ii) content ordering, and (iii) group ordering. Task ordering asks how stories are told, by whom and to whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 115). It entails how family members embody storytelling in a practice that performs, stages, aestheticizes, and dramatizes family stories (Langellier & Peterson 2006). At issue here are the ways in which some family members become senders while others remain receivers following intimate patterns of telling stories, and how the interactional work develops. In other words, task ordering encompasses the conditions of narrative performance, and strategies of transformation to adapt storytelling to new conditions of sociability (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 117, 118).

Families use particular forms of storytelling and retelling to create their own meanings and to engage in particular ways of remembering and forgetting events. Families are continuously immersed in processes of reinterpretation and relocation. Content ordering is rooted in the notion that "family is the subject, medium, and outcome of storytelling" (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 112). It deals with the organization of information, experiences, and the lived meanings that families store, retrieve, and transmit. One facet of content ordering that is particularly relevant to this thesis is the focus it places on examining

the narrative resources and genres that enable family stories to be easily narrated and transmitted.[17]

The third level of ordering, group ordering, comprises the ways in which family storytelling constitutes personal and group identities. The underlying assumption here is premised on the idea that identity is relational and performative, and that stories give flexibility to the boundaries that define you, me, and my/your family. Seen in this light, stories comprise one of the tools used by family members to articulate, recreate and transform their identities.

Many analyzes of family storytelling as a communication practice concern themselves with traditional moments in which families communicate, namely everyday face-to-face conversations (see Deroche, 1996), dinner talks (see Blum-Kulka, 1997) and special events such as celebrations or gatherings in which traditional stories are shared (see Marvin, 2004). Such studies tend to focus on family storytelling as a speech act that is somehow fixed in oral language and face-to-face interactions. However, when transnational families engage in ICT-mediated communication, their members are not limited to relying exclusively on oral language to narrate the family. In these technologically mediated settings orality constitutes only one part of a multimodal constellation of communication resources.

The growing pervasiveness of social networking sites and other platforms supporting the creation and diffusion of self-created content coincides with increased numbers of analyses of digital storytelling (Lundby, 2008, p. 3). The latter refers to the amateur personal

[17] Although canonical, popular or marginal stories are conceived as main genres of family stories, families adapt these genres and create new ones. In the words of Langellier & Peterson (2004b, p. 67), "against the forces of coherence and closure, family storytelling remains open to the contingencies and messiness of ongoing lives. Families live narrative."

stories and self-representational narratives that abound on the Internet. Blogs, social networks, short autobiographic videos, and personal profiles constitute new options for telling stories.

Digital storytelling is widely seen as being underpinned by five phenomena (McWilliam & Hartley, 2009): (i) confessional disclosure that uses technology as a platform; (ii) practices involving forms of training aimed at improving people's capacity to use new narrative devices; (iii) innovative practices used in schools to increase student engagement and to enhance student print and media literacies as well as their abilities to expand the reach of their self-expressions; (iv) a challenge to the traditional distinction between professional and amateur production linking new content to cultural production; and (v) a collective effort lead by a growing number of organizations, festivals, conferences, and competitions dedicated to foster storytelling (for further details see McWilliam & Hartley, 2009). These organizations work with digital storytelling because it allows them to collect public and community histories, to empower the voices of the ordinary people, and to help digital storytellers cope with adverse experiences.

### 2.5 Focusing on Affordances

The concept affordance is generally attributed to the perceptual psychologist, J.J. Gibson, who used it as a core component of his ecological theory of human perception (Gibson, 1979). The theory of affordances was later adapted to the design of everyday objects by Norman (1988) who, as Day & Lloyd (2007, p. 19) observe, "linked affordances closely with the mental and perceptual capabilities of the observer." Gaver (1991) applied the concept of affordances in the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) to refer to attributes of the

interaction between technologies and the people who use them. Today, the concept of affordances is seen as offering a means of understanding technologies "as artifacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 441)

Three technological affordances have been linked to digital storytelling: presence, interactivity, and multimodality. Each is outlined below.

### 2.5.1 Presence

The affordances of ICTs require a reconceptualization of distance, a crucial factor with which transnational families must contend. According to Caron & Caronia (2007) the overcoming of distance through ICT-mediated interactions is characterized by processes in which portable technologies render space mobile (i.e., delocalization), resulting in individuals becoming ubiquitous (i.e., multilocalization). For transnational families involved in frequent communication across geographical divides, ICTs constitute the liminal space between here and there that comes to life every time they interact and communicate (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1012). This technologically generated and supported liminal space can be conceived of as a new social field that transnational families elaborate in their daily communicative practices with distant family members.

One of phenomenon that takes place within this flexible technologically mediated liminal space is presence. Lombard & Ditton (1997, n.p.) define presence as the "'illusion of nonmediation' [that] occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in his/her communication environment and responds as he/she would if the

medium were not there." These authors set out six interrelated but distinct conceptualizations of presence, four of which are relevant to this thesis:[18]

1. Presence as social richness, which refers to "the extent to which a medium is perceived as sociable, warm, sensitive, personal or intimate when it is used to interact with other people" (n.p.).
2. Presence as realism, which refers to "the degree to which a medium can produce seemingly accurate representations of objects, events, and people – representations that look, sound, and/or feel like the 'real' thing." (n.p.)
3. Presence as transportation. This involves three ideas relating to the sense of being transported: (i) a sense of *you are there* by which readers of written narrative, listeners of oral tales, or consumers of advertisements, can be transported to different times and places; (ii) a sense of *it is here* in which objects and people from another place are felt to be brought into the media user's environment; and (iii) a sense of *we are together* which refers to degree to which people "get the impression of sharing space with interlocutors who are at a remote physical site" (n.p.).
4. Presence as immersion, wherein the body is immersed perceptually and psychologically in the other world proposed by the medium.

### 2.5.2 Interactivity

Digital storytelling may also incorporate interactive communication. According to Brea (2007), when the process of communication becomes interactive, the perceptor is no longer mute because s/he also interprets, participates, interacts, and creates her/his own messages. In other words, each emitter is also a perceptor; they both engage in active participation, collective creation, reflective decoding, and critical interpretation.

In Rotaru's (2014) view interactivity is presented as the conjunction of multiple opportunities and potentials media offer to the user to manipulate and modify media content.

[18] The two conceptualisations deemed not relevant for this thesis are: (i) Presence as social actor within a medium in which, for example, a simulacrum of a conversation may be generated between 'normal people' and people on the medium. "The mediated nature of the 'interaction' is ignored and the media personality is incorrectly perceived as a social actor" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997, n.p.). (ii) Presence as medium as social actor. This "involves social responses of media users not to entities (people or computer characters) within a medium, but to cues provided by the medium itself" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997, n.p.).

In the same vein, Lunenfeld (1999) expounds upon the notion that is relevant for this thesis; extractive interactivity. The exercise of extractive interactivity is manifest when a user creates her/his own compendium of messages by stitching together individual pieces of information or hypertexts gathered in the process of navigation through multiple platforms. Put simply, it entails creating an individualized whole by piecing together multiple sources of information (e.g. a graduate student who creates her/his own sense, or mental image, of what a Master's thesis is based on multiple discussions with an array of professors).

### 2.5.3 Multimodality

Gunther Kress (2010) initiated the social semiotic theory of communication, or multimodality, that points to the historical and cultural nature of communication and learning. The notion of multimodality acknowledges an amalgam of multiple "modes to communicate, represent, and express meanings" (Rowsell, 2013, p. 6). Within the context of this thesis, multimodality refers to the incorporation of a variety of multimodal compositions and formats such as voice, music, text, graphics, and still or moving images into communicative processes (Lundby, 2008, p. 8). In the digital domain, this concept expands the traditional idea of performance attached to storytelling insofar as "the multimodality of digital media operates according to mixed logics" (Lundby, 2008, p. 11). This, in turn, suggests that digital storytelling does not merely echo the features of oral storytelling or written narratives, but, instead, fosters new compositions (Lundby, 2008).

Three notions are crucial in multimodality: mode, orchestration, and design. Although the precise definition of mode is subject to ongoing debate, most multimodality scholars agree that it can be understood as referring to units of expression and representation

(Rowsell, 2013, p. 6) shaped by the cultural, historical and social usages of a particular community (Jewitt, 2012, p. 99). For example, Yang (2012) maintains that images, animation, music, gestures, speech, writing, hypertexts, sound, gaze, videos, and posture in embodied interaction can all be considered as modes.

Orchestration is the process by which participants of communication pick, classify, organize, distribute, and blend modes thereby creating transmodal (links of interdependency such as sound and image in contemporary films), intermodal (links between independent modes that cross-reference each other such as illustrations and fonts in a children book), and intramodal (permanent combinations between modes such as color and fabric in a dress) relationships (Rowsell, 2013, p. 4-5).

Design is one of the practices of multimodality, and adapts to situations and purposes in order to define modes and forms of orchestration (Rowsell, 2013, p. 6). According to Gunther (2010, p. 6), designing is the way individuals' interests in the world materialize. Each element of design is the result of a process of decision-making, and each choice unfolds social relations. Two processes are key to designing. The first is transformation, wherein designers reorganize the syntax and the logics of the semiotic resources within a mode to create new meanings (Yang, 2012, p. 223). For example, transforming a family story to include a new moral lesson, or translate a family story originally in Spanish into English or French to expand its reach. The second process is transduction, wherein designers reshape semiotic resources shifting between modes (Yang, 2012, p. 223). This is exemplified though such activities as, creating a video or a blog based on a traditionally oral family story.

## 2.6 Summary and Central Research Question

Family comprises a transnational group and a social system in which meanings are created and common history is shared. In combining role-based definition of family relations with the symbolic interaction perspective for understanding family communication, it is plausible to hypothesize that family members define themselves through social relations and communication with others. Understood in this manner, stories as narrative units, narratives as general systems of stories, and storytelling as a communication practice become avenues that family members use to create and recreate themselves. Likewise, storytelling becomes a critical intersection in which members of transnational families tell and retell their realities while experiencing a diasporic state of mind and engaging in transnational interactions and building transnational social fields.

ICTs frequently enable members of transnational families to continue communicating and interacting with one another in spite of the physical distances separating them. However, the use of ICTs by these individuals often is counterbalanced by the limited material access, inequalities, and gaps in the digital literacy. Nonetheless, it seems plausible, that traditional family narratives and the familial stories exchanged via these platforms are likely being altered through such technological affordances as the illusion of non-mediation (i.e., presence), the ability manipulate and modify media content (i.e., interactivity), and the various modes of expression and representation enabled by multimodality. With this in mind, the central question guiding this thesis is: *How do ICTs catalyze and constrain storytelling within transnational families?* In the next chapter, our attention turns to the methods employed to address this issue.

## Chapter 3: The Method in Hand

In order to address the central research question of this thesis – *How do ICTs catalyze and constrain storytelling within transnational families?* –, I examined the technologically mediated interactions and digital storytelling practices of six Colombian families who have immigrated to Canada from Colombia. The objective was to examine how the members of the participating families co-construct their social realities while telling stories via ICTs. The discussion in this chapter is divided into five sections. The first part sets out how the participant families were recruited. In the second section, the technique used for collecting data is presented. In section three, the process used to analyze and interpret the information gathered from the interviews is discussed. This is followed, in section four, with a reflection statement in which I set out my views regarding issues affecting my analysis and interpretations of the collected data.

### 3.1 Recruiting the Participant Families

Six Colombian families with members in Montreal and Colombia took part in the empirical component of this thesis[19]. These participants comprised a convenience sample. It is the technique in which "the researcher simply selects the cases that are at hand until the sample reaches a desired, designated size." (Powell & Connaway, 2004, p. 68) As stated by Weiss (1994), convenience sampling is particularly appropriate for research in which a lack of official records makes the studied population difficult to find and penetrate. This is the case when it comes to examining the family communication practices of Colombian migrants.

[19] The permission to engage with these families was granted by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity of the University of Ottawa. Certificate of ethics approval file number 06-15-26.

Convenience sampling cannot claim to be representative of the general population. However, it provides what Weiss (1994, pp. 26-27) calls "responders' own assessments of generalization." In other words, the participants in this research exercise are able to comment on the extent to which others perceive, experience, and/or behave likewise in similar situations. The potential non-generalizability of the findings from this thesis is not problematic because this thesis essentially is a pilot study whose findings may be subsequently used to inform a larger study investigating the topic at hand.

The participant families were recruited using a combination of my personal acquaintances (and their referrals) and the online group *Solidaridad Colombiana en Canada* of which I have been a member since 2013.[20] This group's purpose is to enable expatriate Colombian families to share practical information about living in Canada using Facebook as a platform. It started as a closed group for Colombian migrants living in Montreal, and has more recently, begun to welcome Colombians residing in other provinces. At the time of writing, the group has more than 6867 members. The supportive nature of this online group made it an obvious and appropriate place to find volunteers. An open call was published twice in this group and sent to private contacts during the months of August and September 2015 (see Appendix A).

Rather than use fixed typologies to narrow the scope of participant families (using, for example, nuclear families, extended families, one-parent families, and blended families), for this thesis the participant families consisted of groups of individuals who self-identified as family.

[20] See, https://www.facebook.com/solicolocan/

Two principal criteria for inclusion in the study were used, both of which were rooted in the definition of transnational families provided in Chapter 2.[21] These are: (i) that the self-identified families maintain regular ICT-mediated communication linkages among their members across the geographical divide which separates them (i.e., maintain at least bi-monthly conversations with their family members using the Internet-based platforms); and (ii) that the self-identified families consume both Colombian and Canadian media, and/or retain working/academic ties with Colombia while living in Canada, and/or keep connected with friends and colleges in Colombia, and/or maintain Colombian cultural (e.g. food, music, literature) habits while incorporating new ones based on the new experiences in Canada, and/or frequently feel 'here and there'.

This set of possible categories of ways of being (Roudometof, 2005) was meant to evaluate *a priori* the transnational practices of those families. The goal of this filter was to identify Colombian families that seemly practice transnational interactions while using ICTs. It must noted, however, that the notion of transnational families was never beyond debate. To this end, during the interviews, the members of the participant families were asked about possible contradictions or problems to which this concept/term may allude.

Two adult members of each family living in Montreal, Canada were interviewed. In addition, one adult member of each family who has remained in Colombia and who regularly uses ICTs to remain in contact with the individuals residing in Canada was part of the study (e.g. mothers, fathers, siblings). Overall, there were 12 adult family members based in Montreal and six family members who are based in Colombia, for a total of 18 participants.

[21] Recall that in this thesis family is defined as a relational transactional group in which individuals define themselves and their social realities through their relations and conversations with other family members.

In total, six families participated in this thesis. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants is protected in the pages that follow by the use of pseudonyms: Family A, G, L, R, S, and Z.

The period of migration to Canada among the participant families spanned from 10 months to 13 years. In terms of the individuals residing in Montreal, the demographics were as follows. With the exception of one family composed of a single mother and her adolescent son, five participant families are couples (including one homosexual couple). In addition, four of the six families have kids, and a fifth family was expecting a child at the time of the interview. In terms of the participants who live in Colombia, the researcher spoke with four mothers, one father, and one sister. Upon completion of the interviews, it dawned on the researcher that in terms of the five participating couples[22] she had actually had access to ten families – not five – because each partner brought to the discussions her/his individual family history and each dynamic of storytelling was different. All points of view were taken into account.

### 3.2 Data Collection

In order to collect the data required to answer the central research question, a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with members of the participant families during August and September 2015. A written list of questions was used to guide the interviews with the participants but a casual tone of a personal conversation was maintained throughout the sessions. Before meeting with the actual participants, pilot interviews were

[22] Recall that the sixth family is a single parent household.

conducted with three volunteers that ensure that the interview questions were soliciting the types of information being sought. The information gleaned from these sessions was used to fine-tune the interview questions. Each of the interviews was carried out with three members of the same family in attendance. Two members in Montreal were physically present, and the third member, who was in Colombia, was contacted using Skype or Facetime.[23] The open-ended approach facilitated dialogue and reflection on issues of storytelling, presence, interactivity, multimodality as well as other unforeseen issues raised by the participating family members. The conversational tone employed during these sessions was an open door to participants' ideas, perceptions, and experiences (Oppenheim, 1996). Put simply, the use of open-ended questions let participants "express their own ideas spontaneously in their own words" (Oppenheim, 1996, p. 74). A copy of the questionnaire used during the interview sessions is provided in Appendix B.

The rationale for adopting this conversational approach is the recognition that investigating the digital storytelling practices of families requires an extended involvement with words and multimodal and interactive narrative creation as opposed to collecting facts or statistics. In order to allow the researcher to collect family stories, it was decided *a priori* to have the participants' personal words flow. Using close-ended questions, with single word responses or Likert scale type responses, would prevent the exploration from going more deeply into the levels where family experiences and daily life practices remain.

The interviews were carried out at locations chosen by the participants so as to ensure they felt comfortable and secure. In all cases, this location was their respective homes

[23] The decision regarding which video-conferencing software to use was left to the discretion of the interviewees.

in Montreal. Interviews were conducted during normal business hours or at a particular time chosen by the participants. The interview sessions were 45 to 60 minutes in duration. In line with the preferences of the participants, Spanish was the language used throughout the meetings. All conversations were recorded in digital format, with the researcher taking handwritten notes to complement her perceptions during the conversations. Then, the interviews were transcribed in Spanish and sent to the participants via email to both verify accuracy and ensure transparency. In other words, although this thesis is written in English all of the data collection was carried out in Spanish. The findings presented below are based on the researcher's English language translations of the interview transcripts.

Once the interviews had been completed, three families spontaneously, and at their own behest, granted the researcher access to their intimate familial digital interactions. Upon completion of the interview with the members of Family Z, these individuals carried on with a Skype-based family conversation that they permitted me to observe. This post-interview sharing of stories lasted for some two hours. Two other families, Family L and Family R, gave me access to their respective families' *WhatsApp* chat groups for a period of one week following from the interview. It must be noted that the impromptu observations arising from these activities lacked the methodological rigor of formal ethnographic participant observation. Nonetheless, the information gleaned from these activities was a natural complement to the information gathered from the interviews. In each of the three instances, I defined myself as a lurker (Garcia, *et al.*, 2009). Although my identity was not hidden, I passively observed the Skype-based conversation and the accessed discussion groups in WhatsApp.

### 3.3 Analyzing Data

The following is a description of the process used to carry out and analyze the data gathered from the interviews and the informal observations. The explanation below is presented along with a set of tables that shows how the elements of the analysis grew in number while the complexity increased as each step took place. In the first instance, and using the coding practices set out by Yin (2011), data were analyzed to identify "significant statements" and "clusters of meanings" (Creswell, 2013, p. 61) that provided an understanding of how the participant families experience digital storytelling.

The process of data analysis started with the researcher setting out the initial topics of discussion that, in turn, were key to creating the questionnaire guiding the interview discussions. The topics listed in Table 3.1 were aligned with the theoretical groundings of the thesis and the central research question it seeks to address.

**Table 3.1 The First Stage Of Analysis**

| **Initial Topics of Discussion** |
|---|
| Transnational Nature of Families |
| Frequency of communication |
| Type of platform in use |
| Media consumption |
| Linkages with Colombian friends and colleagues |
| Cultural habits |
| Feeling here and there |
| Family Communication Before Migration |
| Types of stories shared |
| Situations in which stories were told |
| Dynamics of storytelling |
| Family Communication After Migration |
| Types of stories shared after migration |
| Dynamics of storytelling after migration |
| Role of technology in a possible change of dynamics |
| Construction of Stories |
| How were/are stories told? |

Upon completing the interviews, the field notes from the informal observations and the recorded interviews were transcribed in their original language (i.e., Spanish) and then gathered in a Hermeneutic Unit (or project) on Atlas IT, a computer software suite for the qualitative analysis of textual, graphical, audio, and video data.[24]

Then, an additional reading to the transcripts was completed looking for recurrent issues. The idea of finding recurrent issues is based on Yin's (2011) concept of *open coding* and refers to the process of generating categories and properties for texts such as interview transcripts. The focus, here, was on identifying recurring common statements expressed by the interviewees. For instance, for the segment "situations in which stories were told" examples of recurrent issues included: dinners (mentioned 11 times), food (mentioned 10 times). Other issues reported more than once were: a trip to the farms (mentioned twice), the sacred nature of those gatherings (mentioned twice), and parties (mentioned twice).

Table 3.2 provides an account of the some of the recurrent issues identified in relation to the initial topics of conversation:

**Table 3.2 The Second Stage Of Analysis**

| Initial Topics of Discussion | Examples of Recurrent Issues |
|---|---|
| Transnational Nature of Families | |
| Frequency of communication | Twice a week (N=4)<br>Twice daily (N=2)<br>Once daily (N=2) |
| Type of platform in use | WhatsApp (N= 11)<br>Telephone (N= 7)<br>Skype (N=6)<br>Facebook (N=2) |
| Media consumption | Both Colombian and Canadian media (N= 8)<br>Use of Facebook to access the news (N= 2) |

[24] See, http://atlasti.com/

| | |
|---|---|
| Linkages with Colombian friends and colleagues | Existing friendships (N=10)<br>Existing work-related relationships (N=2) |
| Cultural habits | Strong cultural habits (N=8)<br>Less strong cultural habits (N=2) |
| Feeling here and there | Disconnection from Colombia (N=10)<br>"Home is here" (N=10)<br>The only connection is family (N=5)<br>Strong sense of being here and there (N=2) |
| Family Communication Before Migration | |
| Types of stories | No classical stories (N=15)<br>Classical stories (N=3) |
| Situations in which stories were told | Dinners (N=11)<br>Food (N=10)<br>Trip to the farms (N=2)<br>The sacred nature of those gatherings (N=2)<br>Parties (N=2) |
| Dynamics of storytelling | The role of women (N=18)<br>Collective nature (N=18)<br>No formalities (N=5) |
| Family Communication After Migration | |
| Types of stories | No classical stories (N=18)<br>Stories are linked to platforms (N=10)<br>Stories are dispersed throughout platforms (N=10) |
| Dynamics of storytelling | The number of participants is getting shorter (N=18)<br>Illusion of nonmediation (N=12)<br>No illusion of nonmediation (N=3)<br>"They are here and we are there" (N=2) |
| Role of technology in a possible change of dynamics | Positive (N=24)<br>Negative (N=8) |
| Construction of Stories | |
| How were/are stories told? | Text messages + Emoticons (N=18)<br>Digital family photos (N=18) |

Using the Code Manager function of Atlas TI,[25] I then reviewed the recurrent issues in order to identify details and additional pieces of information (i.e., constituent elements) relating to these issues. For example, in the initial topic of conversation labeled "Role of technology in a possible change of dynamics" recurrent issues were general and vague: positive and negative. Therefore, it was necessary to identify constituent elements so as to

[25] This function enables users to retrieve all codes along with their quotations.

better understand the experiences reported by the participants with regard to the terms 'positive' and 'negative'. Table 3.3 details some of the constituent elements identified through this analysis

**Table 3.3 The Third Stage Of Analysis**

| Initial Topics of Discussion | Examples of Recurrent Issues | Examples of Constituent Elements |
|---|---|---|
| Transnational Nature of Families | | |
| Frequency of communication | Twice a week (N=4)<br>Twice daily (N=2)<br>Once daily (N=2) | *Not applicable* |
| Type of platform in use | WhatsApp (N= 11)<br>Telephone (N= 7)<br>Skype (N=6)<br>Facebook (N=2) | *Not applicable* |
| Media consumption | Both Colombian and Canadian media (N= 8)<br>Use of Facebook to access the news (N= 2) | *Not applicable* |
| Linkages with Colombian friends and colleagues | Existing friendships (N=10)<br>Existing work-related relationships (N=2) | *Not applicable* |
| Cultural habits | Strong cultural habits (N=8)<br>Less strong cultural habits (N=2) | - Reading in Spanish<br>- Cooking traditional Colombian recipes<br>- Listening to Colombian music<br>- Maintaining their Spanish language<br>- Creating small communities of Colombian friends in Montreal. |
| Feeling here and there | Disconnection from Colombia (N=10)<br>"Home is here" (N=10)<br>The only connection is family (N=5)<br>Strong sense of being here and there (N=2) | *Not applicable* |
| Family Communication Before Migration | | |
| Types of stories | No classical stories (N=15)<br>Classical stories (N=3) | Daily life + Work<br>Plan for the future<br>Politics<br>Gossip<br>Jokes<br>Kids<br>Tales |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Situations in which stories were told | Dinners (N=11)<br>Food (N=10)<br>Trip to the farms (N=2)<br>The sacred nature of those gatherings (N=2)<br>Parties (N=2) | *Not applicable* |
| Dynamics of storytelling | The role of women (N=18)<br>Collective nature (N=18)<br>No formalities (N=5) | *Not applicable* |
| Family Communication After Migration | | |
| Types of stories | No classical stories (N=18) | Daily life<br>Kids<br>Gossip<br>Recipes<br>Politics |
| | Stories are linked to platforms (N=10) | *Not applicable* |
| | Stories are dispersed throughout platforms (N=10) | Many chat rooms |
| Dynamics of storytelling | The number of participants is getting shorter (N=18) | Mothers are the center.<br>Other relatives are satellites. |
| | Illusion of nonmediation (N=12) | Recreation of situations<br>Transnational coexistence |
| | No illusion of nonmediation (N=3) | They feel disconnected<br>They are aware of the technological malfunctions. |
| | "They are here and we are there" (N=2) | They "travel" to spaces.<br>They evoke spaces. |
| Role of technology in a possible change of dynamics | Positive (N=24) | Inclusion<br>Communication booster<br>Free way to talk |
| | Negative (N=8) | Reticence<br>Limitation of presence<br>Entropy<br>Permanent but succinct contact |
| Construction of Stories | | |
| How were/are stories told? | Text messages + Emoticons (N=18)<br>Digital family photos (N=18) | *Not applicable* |

After visualizing both the recurrent issues and the constituent elements in the Network View Manager on Atlas TI,[26] I then reviewed all the coded material looking for

[26] This function enables users to display quotations, codes, code families and other features of the coding by using accessible graphic means.

relational elements that can be understood as linkages among recurrent issues and constituent elements. Yin's (2011, p. 187) labels this process *axial coding.* It is the process in which "categories are systematically developed and linked with subcategories." In other words, this was a process of contextualization: connecting and reconnecting, establishing relationships between different practices, constructing "systems" out of ways of doing things that make sense only in relation to each other (Ferguson, 2011, p. 198). For example, when connecting recurrent issues from both "situations in which stories were told before migration" and "dynamics of storytelling before migration" one relational element arose: "Storytelling likely occurred during dinners, organized by women, foster by food, and shared collectively". Table 3.4 offers a panorama of some of the relational elements found in the analysis:

**Table 3.4 The Fourth Stage Of Analysis**

| Initial Topics of Discussion | Examples of Recurrent Issues | Examples of Constituent Elements | Examples of Relational Elements |
|---|---|---|---|
| Transnational Nature of Families | | | |
| Frequency of communication | Twice a week (N=4)<br>Twice daily (N=2)<br>Once daily (N=2) | *Not applicable* | Families seem to create a polymedia environment. |
| Type of platform in use | WhatsApp (N= 11)<br>Telephone (N= 7)<br>Skype (N=6)<br>Facebook (N=2) | *Not applicable* | |
| Media consumption | Both Colombian and Canadian media (N= 8)<br>Use of Facebook to access the news (N= 2) | *Not applicable* | Families seem to have transnational interactions. |
| Linkages with Colombian friends and colleagues | Existing friendships (N=10)<br>Existing work-related relationships (N=2) | *Not applicable* | |
| Cultural habits | Strong cultural habits (N=8)<br>Less strong cultural habits (N=2) | - Reading in Spanish<br>- Cooking traditional Colombian recipes | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | - Listening to Colombian music<br>- Maintaining their Spanish language<br>- Creating small communities of Colombian friends in Montreal. | |
| Feeling here and there | Disconnection from Colombia (N=10)<br>"Home is here" (N=10)<br>The only connection is family (N=5)<br>Strong sense of being here and there (N=2) | *Not applicable* | The term transnationalism seems to be confusing. |
| Family Communication Before Migration | | | |
| Types of stories | No classical stories (N=15)<br>Classical stories (N=3) | Daily life + Work<br>Plan for the future<br>Politics<br>Gossip<br>Jokes<br>Kids<br>Tales | There are non-narrative and narrative talk with few references to the classical definition of stories. |
| Situations in which stories were told | Dinners (N=11)<br>Food (N=10)<br>Trip to the farms (N=2)<br>The sacred nature of those gatherings (N=2)<br>Parties (N=2) | *Not applicable* | Storytelling likely occurred during dinners, organized by women, foster by food, and shared collectively. |
| Dynamics of storytelling | The role of women (N=18)<br>Collective nature (N=18)<br>No formalities (N=5) | *Not applicable* | |
| Family Communication After Migration | | | |
| Types of stories | No classical stories (N=18) | Daily life<br>Kids<br>Gossip<br>Recipes<br>Politics | There is only non-narrative talk. |
| | Stories are linked to platforms (N=10) | *Not applicable* | Platforms seem to shape their conversations and processes of storytelling. |
| | Stories are dispersed throughout platforms (N=10) | Many chat rooms | |
| Dynamics of storytelling | The number of participants is getting shorter (N=18) | Mothers are the center. Other relatives are satellites. | Non applicable |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Illusion of nonmediation (N=12) | Recreation of situations<br>Transnational coexistence | A liminal space seems to appear.<br>There seems to be a contradictory sense of being together. |
| | No illusion of nonmediation (N=3) | They feel disconnected<br>They are aware of the technological malfunctions. | |
| | "They are here and we are there" (N=2) | They "travel" to spaces.<br>They evoke spaces. | |
| Role of technology in a possible change of dynamics | Positive (N=24) | Inclusion<br>Communication booster<br>Free way to talk | *Not applicable* |
| | Negative (N=8) | Reticence<br>Limitation of presence<br>Entropy<br>Permanent but succinct contact | *Not applicable* |
| Nature of Stories | | | |
| How were/are stories told? | Text messages + Emoticons (N=18)<br>Digital family photos (N=18) | *Not applicable* | New modes of expression and representation seem to emerge |

In sum, the analysis of data was conducted starting from the initial topics of conversations. In the first instance, recurrent issues were identified through a detailed analysis of the interview transcripts. Then, the analysis focused on both the internal and the external level of those recurrent issues in order to find more details to understand them (constituent elements) and the relationships that can be established between them (relational elements).

### 3.4 Personal Reflection Statement: Framing a Point of View

I am a Colombian immigrant to Canada, and have a personal awareness of multi-locality (i.e., I am both here and there) from which a multiplicity of histories, cultures, practices, identities,

communities and selves are produced. This awareness is one of my sources of adaptive strength. In migrating to Canada, I have created new networks of exchange and communication thereby producing transnational interactions, and developing flexible articulations between multiple nation-states and social spaces. Put simply, I inhabit a malleable environment.

I also use ICTs on a daily basis to interact with my family members in Colombia and practice digital storytelling with them. In the words of Langellier & Peterson (2004, p.37), "I cannot remove myself and remain aloof without having an effect on the meanings" of those words that interviewees shared during our conversations. As such, in conducting the research for this thesis, I embrace my transnational status as an opportunity to understand the participants' experiences rather than seeing it as an impediment to supposed objectivity.

### 3.5 Summary

A convenience sample of six Colombian families with members in Montreal and Colombia took part in the research for this thesis. They were recruited from the Facebook group *Solidaridad Colombiana en Canada* and from my personal acquaintances. A series of in-depth, open-ended interviews with a total of 18 individuals, members of the participant families, were conducted over a two-month period. Informal observations of one Skype-based conversation and an analysis of the chat logs of two WhatsApp exchanges complemented the collected data. The analysis of the findings comprised a process of identifying recurrent issues, constituent elements, and relational elements within the transcripts of the interviews. The discussion in the following chapter sets out the information and perspectives gathered from the first part of interviews with the participant families. It

gives an account of the participants' reported dynamics of communication before migrating to Canada, and their ongoing relationship with ICTs.

## Chapter 4: Family Storytelling in Colombia and on the Screen

The discussion presented in this chapter sets out the empirically grounded findings obtained from the first part of interviews with the participant families. The first section presents the participants' recollections about their times in Colombia prior to commencing the migration process. These experiences offer a background to the participants' communicative experiences, providing a description of face-to-face familial relationships subsequently mediated by technology. The second part of the chapter gives an account of the participants' views about transnational interactions, the extent to which they view themselves as transnational families, and the implications thereof. The third and final section discusses the participant family members' reported relationship with ICTs.

### 4.1 Back in Colombia: All About Those Succulent Stories

Each interview session began with the participants recollecting their times in Colombia prior to commencing the migration process. These experiences, ostensibly served as a benchmark by which the participants assessed their technologically mediated post-migration communication and storytelling activities. In discussing family storytelling, the participants from all six families recalled the family meals they had when living in Colombia. These memories transported them back to family dining tables, along with the smell of beans boiling in the pot, freshly made white rice, crunchy sweet peas, fluffy potatoes, steamy breakfasts, and coffee. Also remembered was the fact that it was mothers or grandmothers who cooked for the entire family and who set everything ready to start conversations around the table. Some of the memories expressed, included comments such as:

**Family A:**
*Family A Member 2 (FAM2):* We usually talked while [my mother] was cooking. Kitchen has always been the meeting place for our family.

**Family G:**
*Researcher (R):* So your family got together every night?
*FGM1:* Yes, to eat and talk about our day…
*R:* What did you usually eat?
*FGM1:* Usually simple meals, but we never missed white rice and potatoes. My mom frequently made beans, lentils, sweet beans. I never make that kind of food and I miss them.
*FGM2:* Me too.
*FGM1*: My mom was always in the kitchen.

**Family L:**
*FLM1*: Every Saturday, we had lunch at my grandma's. … Basically, we got together because my grandma cooked the dishes we loved. Generally, these recipes were typical Colombian. She had a family cookbook that she used to make special meals…

**Family R:**
*Mother in Colombia:* Along with food, alcohol, or music, we would talk about the bad and the good things we had experienced. Yeah, that was the time to share plans, concerns, experiences…

**Family S:**
*Mother in Colombia:* For example, on Saturdays, I used to make breakfast and ring a little bell for everyone to come down and sit at the table. Then, we talked about our personal issues, what everyone was living, our jobs, our family stories, news about the country that was important for us…

**Family Z:**
*FZM1*: Every weekend, we went to my mother's to have lunch … There, my mother looked after us. She cooked lunch for us. That was it. We came in, ate, chatted, participated, and told stories…

Both Montreal-based members of Family L described these types of family gatherings as sacred, with other activities having to be rescheduled in order to ensure one's attendance. Beyond that, all members of the six participant families defined these dinners as special occasions, breaks in the routine in which people got together to talk and express their affection for each other. When recalling these events, the members of all six participant

families treasured dinners and gatherings as intimate conversational events in which their families took form and family bonds were solidified.

Two central components were consistently present in these recollections: women and food. Mothers, grandmothers, and, to a lesser extent, aunts, were identified as taking leadership roles in these family activities. It was these women who hosted family gatherings at their houses, whose expert hands prepared the food, and who established the basis for conversations. Indeed, all the Montreal-based interview participants talked about mothers and grandmothers as centers of the familial universe. The role of these matriarchs was so important that, as FLM1 reported, the passing away of these family leaders tends to alter family dynamics such that family gatherings often become more sporadic. In describing the dynamics of their post-migration family storytelling experiences all participants reported that, it is still women who strengthen and sustain the emotional and affective bond within their respective families.

As for food, the members of all six participant families emphasized the centrality and power of shared meals vis-à-vis in the dynamics of family storytelling prior to their having migrated to Canada. For these individuals, food was the catalyst for family conversation. It reportedly allowed their respective families to feel tightly united, comfortable, and secure which, in turn, fostered a relaxed environment within which family members were able to share their stories. Traditional dishes were associated with putting peoples' minds at ease, connecting with their relatives, and letting conversations flow. In the participants' view, collective familial conversations were a direct product of this pleasant state of emotional, affective, and alimentary abundance.

The interviewees reported that when they resided in Colombia their family interactions were communal communication activities in which both men and women participated. Stories were stitched together by interested and willing actors adding their points of view and giving life to a communal voice. While acknowledging that there sometimes were fragmented chats, there was a pervasive sense among the interviewees that everybody participated in the general conversational and narrative event. The following exemplary statements summarize the collective nature of the described conversations:

**Family A:**
*Father in Colombia:* During our family parties, sometimes there was a unique topic of conversation in which everybody participated. Other times, conversations took place among little groups depending on each member preferences. …We had different ways to talk and share.

**Family G:**
*FGM1:* I brought up topics, news, anecdotes, then, everybody took part of the conversation.

**Family L:**
*Mother in Colombia:* Everybody gave their opinion about everybody's, even if they were not invited.

**Family R:**
*Mother in Colombia:* Conversations happened quite fluently, topics came up spontaneously. Someone started talking about health and ended up talking about politics.
*FRM1:* Conversations were inclusive. All of us butted in. They were so transparent and open that if you saw someone whispering or telling secrets to someone else there might be a problem.

**Family S:**
*Mother in Colombia:* The idea was to keep the team together. If we face hard times, a strong team will move forward. If we have problems, we will discuss them, each of us will give her/his opinion, her/his point of view, and possible alternatives to solve the problem.

**Family Z:**
*FZM1:* We did not have any protocol. My mom is a modest and spontaneous person. While she was cooking lunch, we realized that the table was full of things and needed to be set, so started doing so.
*R:* How about the conversation?
*FZM1:* Conversation was the same: natural and spontaneous.
*FZM2:* At the table, we only have one topic of conversation…

On the basis of the recalled details reported by the interview participants, it seems plausible to conclude that the topics of their face-to-face familial conversations in Colombia were seldom pre-planned, coming about, iteratively. The information presented in Table 4.1 offers a panorama of the topics the interviewees reported as being touched upon during the family dinners and gatherings.

**Table 4.1. Topics of Conversation in Colombia**

| ***Topic of conversation*** | ***Example*** |
|---|---|
| **Daily Life + Work** *(N=9)* | **Family L:** *Mother in Colombia:* We talked about different things: that my mom played cards with her friends; that P has a sore knee; that Q has problems with her hip; that R was not feeling well; that something happened to J at school; that C has some project at work… |
| **Plans for the Future** *(N=5)* | **Family A:** *FAM1*: We also planned things. Before I moved to Canada, we used to travel together every year. We went to San Andrés, Cartagena, Santa Marta… We used family gatherings to plan everything related to those trips. |
| **Politics (country current affairs)** *(N=4)* | **Family G:** *FGM1*: We used to watch the news together because my mom's husband has always liked to watch the news. TV was in the dining room, so while we ate, we watched and started making comments on the news: the chaotic traffic in Bogota, for example… |
| **Gossip** *(N=3)* | **Family S:** *FSM1*: I would say that we mainly shared news about our relatives. |
| **Jokes** *(N=3)* | **Family L:** *FLM2*: We always talked in a jovial way. It was more like "pulling everyone else's leg" (*mamadera de gallo* in Spanish), especially among my mom's family. My uncles have always teased each other a lot. They all even have nicknames… The main topic was to make fun of each other. |
| **Other topics mentioned…** The kids *(N=2)* Academic issues *(N=2)* | |

| |
|---|
| Anecdotes about soccer *(N=1)*<br>Family decisions *(N=1)*<br>Individual concerns *(N=1)* |

The information reported in Table 4.1 suggests that in terms of the traditional definition of stories,[27] the repertoire of stories shared among members of the six participant families is somewhat limited. FAM1 was the only participant to mention stories that had a full plot, including a beginning, middle, and end:

> When we, my sister and I, were little, my mom told us legends, legends of her village, like The Weeping Woman (*La Llorona* in Spanish). I also remember that she also told us stories about the country like the altercation between liberals and conservatives that she and her family went through.

In the case of Family S, two of its participant members referenced the telling of stories offering a moral during family gatherings.

> *FSM1*: When something bad happened or someone acted in some way, some consequences were triggered… Those stories help us evaluate the right and the wrong.
> *R:* So, they had moral.
> *FSM1*: Sure, it was important.
> *Mother in Colombia:* Learning.
> *FSM1*: Yeah. It was a learning process. Something was happening, which was not normal, so you had to talk to reach corrections of acting.

According to the recollections of the interviewees, the familial conversations in which they engaged during family dinners and gatherings were largely comprised of flexible non-narrative talk.[28] This non-narrative talk seemed to occur when family members shared updates about their daily lives, expressed their problems, shared political opinions or

[27] Recall that Labov & Waletzky argue that a classic family story should include: (i) an abstract with the main elements of the story, (ii) an introduction that builds the scene and characters, (iii) the development of the events, (iv) the event's resolution, (v) a coda that summarizes the story and (vi) a conclusion that often provides a moral to the story. See Chapter 2 page 21.

[28] Recall that non-narrative talk is defined as (i) a way to report reality, truth and rationality; (ii) a message without an internal temporality linked to a plot; (iii) a way of talking that revolves around a problem or an argument; (iv) a conversation associated with "processes of information giving, analysis, and rationalization" (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2000, p. 73). See Chapter 2 page 26.

individual concerns, and informed others about recent events including their work-related and academic issues. None of the interview participants reported the telling of stories at family dinners that can be categorised as falling into canonical, popular, or from the margins genres. In other words, the responses suggest that the participants did not make any particular distinction between stories (as a narrative unit) and general topics of conversation. This is noteworthy because it implies that it was through both narrative and non-narrative talk that the participants' respective families created and recreated the stories that united them.

This, in turn, suggests that within the participants' families the key to family communication and storytelling may not be the message (i.e., the stories) per se, but rather the communication process itself (i.e., the act of sharing codes, and the practice of creating meaning for their interactions). Furthermore, the responses of the interview participants leave open the possibility that among their respective families stories are mainly shared or common experiences that are deemed to be in some way meaningful for the entire family whether past or future. Rather than being rooted in particular genres, the participants' families seem to define stories as reflections of a shared code (i.e., something that only the family can understand) involving words, acts, looks, or references linking conversations to a shared history in a complex process of conjuring and transforming memories. In other words, for these individuals, family stories seemingly become the common experience and the shared code that fosters intimate connections within their respective families through both narrative and non-narrative talks.

The participants' observations about family storytelling prior to their having migrated to Canada also suggests that, for these individuals, their stories (or acts of experience) were mainly conveyed orally, occurring in convivial face-to-face settings surrounded by good

smells and tastes. With their flexible agendas, fluctuating discussions, juxtaposed voices, and apparently unlinked issues, family dinners and gatherings constituted ideal moments for family storytelling to take place. To this end, both the non-narrative talk and storytelling that took place at these events was recalled as fostering narratives and sustaining a mix of the affection and closeness needed to reproduce and reinforce intimate familial bonds.

In sum, when recollecting their storytelling practices in Colombia the views expressed by the interviewees appear to coincide with McFeat's (1974) assertion that family is best understood as a small-group culture that uses interactions to fuel its existence. In other words, family members used storytelling and non-narrative talk as survival strategies to articulate who they were as individuals and as a collective.

### 4.2 Testing the Flows of Transnationalism

During the second part of the interviews the participants were asked about the transnational nature of their interactions after their arrival in Canada. The period of time that had lapsed since the participant families migrated to Canada spanned from 10 months to 13 years. In order to delineate the transnational practices of the participants residing in Montreal, these individuals were asked about their media consumption habits, their post-migration relationships with former colleagues and friends still residing in Colombia, and their cultural behaviours/habits (i.e., eating traditions, religious practices, language, and musical preferences). The aim was to understand the link between the transnational actions of the participants and the storytelling dynamics manifest in their respective families.

Ten members of the six participant families – each of whom resides in Montreal – stated that they regularly consume both Canadian and Colombian media content. For

example, in offering a response that was echoed by the other nine interview participants, FAM1 said: *"*in the mornings I listen to Colombian radio, but at lunch I read Canadian online press.*"* The two interviewee(s) (FGM2 and FLM1) who claimed not to have direct contact with Colombian media content pointed out that they often get information about Colombian news from their friends on Facebook. All of the Montreal-based interviewees reported maintaining contact with their friends who remain in Colombia, and acknowledged that the strength of these long-distance relationships seemed to wane over time. Two members of the participant families (FGM1 and FLM2) reported keeping an ongoing work-related network in Colombia. Ten interviewees from five of the participant families mentioned maintaining their cultural habits through regularly reading in Spanish, cooking traditional Colombian recipes, listening to Colombian music, actively striving to maintain their Spanish language, and creating small communities of Colombian friends in Montreal. The exception was the two Montreal-based members of Family S who claimed to have lost most of their cultural traditions,

> because we have tried pretty hard to adapt to the Canadian culture. It was a very important issue for us from the beginning. My husband and I adapt very easily to new things. Let's say we do not miss the food because we love all kind of food. Our connection with Colombia is strictly through our family.

When asked about the concept of 'transnational' all the interview participants expressed some discomfort with this notion despite their remaining connected to their friends and colleagues in Colombia, to Colombian media content, and to some cultural aspects of the country. The responses echo Bash *et al.* (1994)'s claim, discussed in Chapter 2, that most individuals rarely identify themselves as transnational because identities remain framed in terms of loyalty to nations and nation-states. The views expressed by the interviewees from

Family Z exemplify the apparent challenge both they and the other participants have in defining themselves as transnational:

*R:* Do you feel here and there, meaning, in Canada and in Colombia?
*FZM1:* Yeah. At the same time.
*FZM2:* Yes, of course, that's totally applicable to us because, first, we have family there; we have a house there; our properties are there. That's why one cannot untie oneself from everything that happens there.
*FZM1:* Besides, there's a little girl [our daughter] who is now demanding to have a family…
*R:* In what sense?
*FZM2:* She is demanding the love of her grandparents and uncles.
*FZM1:* She wants to spend time with the family.
*R:* So if I tell you that you can be defined as a transnational family, what would you think? Does the term 'transnational' mean something to you?
*FZM1:* Transnational, as breaking barriers, as breaking boundaries, right?
*FZM2:* Well. It is difficult because the family inner circle, which is my wife and daughter is one thing… Another thing is the family group that includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins…
*FZM1:* That's the word, family group.
*FZM2:* Then the family group may be transnational, but us, as a family inner circle, we are not.
*FZM1:* Exactly, exactly.

Ten of the Montreal-based interviewees in five families stressed that their home is in Canada and that despite their acknowledging a sense of nostalgia for Colombia they feel disconnected from their country of origin. Some of the views expressed regarding this matter included:

**Family A:**
*FAM2:* In my case, after having been there the last time … I felt very disconnected from Colombia. Everything is chaos.

**Family G:**
*R:* Do you feel here and there?
*FGM2:* Here.
*FGM1:* … he likes here.
*R:* … What about you?
*FGM1:* I feel better here because here I have, we have for example time for sharing, talking, going out. There was no time before, none ... but sometimes, for example on Mother's Day, or birthdays, one feels like wanting to be there. There are days...

**Family L:**
*R:* Do you frequently feel here and there?
*FLM1:* Not anymore.
*R:* What happened?
*FLM1:* Let's say that at first I watched Colombian television; at first I read more Colombian news; I was in contact with my mom every day; then the issue was much more intense. Then I stopped doing all of that. Today my daily life mainly happens here, in my house.

**Family R:**
*FRM2:* I feel like a Colombian who is now less Colombian.
*FRM1:* In my view, when you are in Colombia, you are 100% Colombian. Then, when you are here, you absorb other things and the percentage decreases. If I take a 20% from somewhere else, I am no longer 100% Colombian but 80%. However, if you add the two percentages, you will get a total.

**Family S:**
*FSM2:* At the beginning I was going through a stage of transition. I felt neither here nor there. I was kind of lost trying to understand and adapt. After a while, I realized that Canada has given me something very important: peace. Then, it was easy for me to be and feel completely here.

Five individuals – FAM1, FAM2, FLM2, FSM1 and FSM2 – reported that their only persisting tie to Colombia was a strong family link. These individuals attributed the strength of the family bond to the topics and emotions they share with other family members:

**Family A:**
*FAM1:* My only connection is with my family, but since my parents come quite often, at least once a year, then I do not need to go to Colombia.
*FAM2:* In my case, after having been there the last time … I realized that my family is my only remaining connection.

**Family L:**
*FLM2:* When talking about soccer, for example with my family, I am 100% there, in Colombia.

**Family S:**
*FSM1:* Above all, my link is my family. It is the only link I have with the country. If they were not there, the link would be minimal.
*FSM2:* In Colombia I do not feel at home. My family is the only connection I have with the country.

Although feeling somehow disconnected from Colombia, two interviewees (FRM1 and FAM1) reported having a latent connection with the country. FRM1, for example, described frequently making a journey to his mother's house. This individual stated that during his Skype-based conversations with his mother she is often cooking or sewing and this makes him feel completely there because every wall and room in that place is part of him. According to this person, after having visited him in Canada his mother reportedly feels the same because she now recognizes the actual space in which he lives and is able to mentally recreate it despite the geographical distance separating them. Expounding on this spatial perception, FAM1, noted that whenever his parents come to Montreal, Colombia *travels* with them.

The responses presented above seemingly resonate with the claim that transnationalism is not related to fixed national identities or geographical frontiers insofar as transnational interactions can be maintained despite the distance. The interviewees' perceptions offer a glimpse of transnationalism as a way for individuals to create and sustain social relationships with persons or topics with which they feel connected for some reason, and with deterritorialized practices that allow individuals to travel from here to there using memories, remembrances, or even common stories. To this end, it seems plausible to conclude that despite their unease with being labeled as transnational families the interviewees, understand transnationalism as a dynamic that revolves around the domain of experience and interaction as opposed to being limited to the physical sphere.

### 4.3 Tech-Linked

The Montreal-based participants' reported frequency of communication with family members in Colombia was diverse, spanning from twice daily to two or three times per month. This said, all of the interviewees noted that the frequency of their interactions has decreased in relation to the amount of time they have spent living Canada. Put simply, communications with family members in Colombia were more frequent in the first months and years of having migrated to Canada.

All participants reported using an array of communication platforms to engage in cross-border familial communication, including internet- and mobile phone-based platforms such instant messaging (IM), social networking sites (SNS) and webcam via voice over Internet protocol (VOIP). In other words, they talk, see, text, and send photos and videos to family members using diverse platforms e.g., WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook chat, Facetime, Viber, and Telephone (pre-paid cards and Internet Home Phone such as Magic Jack). The information presented in Table 4.2 outlines the polymedia environment created by the participant families.

**Table 4.2. Polymedia Environment Created by Six Colombian Families in Transnational Communications**

| ***Family*** | | ***Platform in use*** | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | WhatsApp (N=11) | Telephone (N=7) | Skype (N=6) | Facebook (N=2) | Facetime (N=1) | Viber (N=1) | Xbox (N=1) |
| **A** | FMA1 with parents | ■ | | | | ■ | ■ | |
| | FMA2 with mother | | ■ | | | | | |
| | FMA2 with sisters | ■ | ■ | | | | | |
| **G** | FGM1 with sister | ■ | | | ■ | | | |
| | FGM2 with aunt | ■ | | | ■ | | | |
| **L** | FML1 with mother | ■ | ■ | | | | | |
| | FML2 with parents | ■ | | ■ | | | | |
| **R** | FMR1 with parents | ■ | ■ | ■ | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | FMR2 with parents | | | | | | | |
| **S** | FMS1 with parents | | | | | | | |
| | FMS1 with brother | | | | | | | |
| | FMS2 with parents | | | | | | | |
| **Z** | FMZ1 with mother | | | | | | | |
| | FMZ2 with parents | | | | | | | |

The views expressed by the Colombia-based interviewees suggests that these individuals follow the lead of their Canada-based family members in terms of deciding upon the communication platform used to communicate at a distance. According to this group of interviewees, the choice about which platform to use is contingent upon who they are communicating with, the specific context/situation of the communicative exchange (i.e., whether they are at home or on the move), and their individual technical abilities.

Although no specific questions about processes of domestication were posed during the interview sessions, and the members of the participant families did not explicitly articulate their experiences in this regard, the adoption and integration of ICTs into familial communicative activities implies a process in which these devices were brought home and embraced as part of the family dynamic. Expounding on this type of experience the Colombia-based member of Family A described his family's experience as follows:

> We have lived through a time of change, but it feels that the change happened overnight. In the 1970s, D's grandfather and three of his aunts went to live in New York. Back then our communication was by letters. It was a little monthly letter that everyone expected to arrive. … When D emigrated, our communication was based on a single phone call every Saturday. We got ready for that call and the rest of the week we had no contact. However, nowadays ... having this sort of communication via these very advanced texts and video platforms is a comfort, a cheer, a delight. You have to consider that now we have the other person on the other side of the screen, so close and so instant.

In their interview discussions, all members of the participant families noted that the question of which communication technologies to adopt to facilitate family communications

at a distance was decided upon by mutual agreement. These observations suggest an ongoing iterative process that entails continuously exploring different communication options, starting with the telephone. The aim here, of course, is to determine what they believe to be *the* best medium of communication. Different devices, platforms, and apps have and are constantly being tested, used, taken into account, and in some cases dismissed. This process of exploration seemingly enables the participant family members to reach an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of different technologies in relation to their respective familial communication practices. The information presented in Table 4.3 sets out some of the advantages and disadvantages noted in by the interviewees. The diversity of perspectives reported aligns with Wilding's (2006, p. 134) claim that ICTs are not all "'sunny day' technologies."

**Table 4.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of ICTs**

| ***Advantages*** | ***Example Quote*** |
|---|---|
| **Inclusion** *(N=11)* | **Family R:** *FRM1:* Thanks to the platforms that exist today, I can include my family in everything that happens every day, instantly. If I am at a party with friends and I see my daughters doing something special, celebrating a birthday, whatever, I take a picture and send it. Then, they [my family] find out, instantly, what I am doing and with whom. That is why a lot of barriers of distance are now broken. Despite the distance, we feel closer because we are not missing out so many things happening in everyday life because we have the information instantly either textually or visually. |
| **Communication Booster** *(N=11)* | **Family L:** *FLM1:* Honestly, I believe that technology is the one that fosters our conversations. I believe that without technology it would be difficult for us to write a long letter or print a photo and send them by traditional mail. *R.* What has technology helped you do? *FLM1:* To share immediately what happens. I think that if there were not such chats, or any option to communicate digitally, really, I would be completely away from most of my family. *FLM2:* Same here. For me, technology enables the exchange of information. It gives you more control over what you want to share, when |

| | |
|---|---|
| | you want to share it and whom you want to share with. In other words, today, if I want my mom to know something, then I will write her exclusively as opposed to the times when we were in Colombia when I had to wait for the precise moment to talk alone with my mom… I believe that the level of manipulation (I am not sure if the term is right) you can reach with this medium of communication is higher: many things are under your control. No one forces you to talk. I think that the fact of having written records helps you because no matter if you did not answer right away, whether you did not want to answer or you were busy, you can do it later because there is a record. Conversation flows and no one is lost. I think it makes my life easier. Let's say technology for me is the one that makes it possible to communicate, especially due to the immediacy of transmission. |
| **Free Way to Talk** *(N=2)*[29] | **Family S:** *FSM1:* Technological progress is now huge in terms of communication because previously it was performed by phone; it was expensive, not immediate, and more complex. Right now, you are able to see the person, watch her/his expression, see how things are going. I know how important this is for my mom. We can last 20 minutes, one hour, two hours, or even three hours talking without paying. It is free, and it is great. I know that my brother brought my parents a tablet to communicate via Skype with me because we did not have this kind of communication before. That happened two or three years ago, and ever since dynamics have changed completely: my mom is calmer and happier. It was a good change for both of us. |
| ***Disadvantages*** | ***Example Quote*** |
| **Reticence** *(N=2)* | **Family R:** *FRM2:* I do not particularly feel spontaneous in a conversation. I think [technology] prevents spontaneity. *R.* In what sense? *FRM2:* Since there is no visual contact, no connection… *Mother in Colombia:* Maybe, you can say something that you are not really feeling... *FRM1:* Or maybe, it is the fact that you have time to express adequately whatever you want to say… you have time to write, rewrite, erase… *FRM2:* Spontaneity is lost, then. |
| **Limitations of Presence** *(N=2)* | **Family L:** *Mother in Colombia:* Every time I use Skype I am glad to see them [my relatives in Montreal], but annoyed not to be there. In other words, I have not been able to cope with that conformism of seeing them on a screen and but not being able to touch, caress them... To me, there is still a limiting condition within Skype. I feel that it is preventing me from being with them. |
| **Entropy** *(N=2)* | **Family Z:** *FZM2:* It is not the same to have a conversation with one person looking into her/his eyes, interacting with her/his, that having her/his on the |

[29] It seems that these participants did not take into account the monthly cost of Internet or the price of devices and platform services.

| | |
|---|---|
| | screen. There are times when you cannot participate as much as you want because the communication is interrupted or broken… The fact of seeing each other helps our communication a little bit, but it does not open the channel of communication as if we had it now (in this face-to-face conversation)… It is definitely limited. |
| **Permanent but Succinct Contact** *(N=2)* | **Family A:**<br>*FAM1:* During the time when my mom was in the hospital [in Colombia], digital media were crucial to keeping me updated on what was happening during surgery. I used WhatsApp, Facetime, and Viber. In that case, technology allowed me to have that permanent contact… On the other hand, I want to add something. Although technology has allowed us to participate in each of us daily lives, from the point of view of someone who lives here [in Montreal], the experience is not the same. In my case, for example, I am sharper on the phone; rarely am I talking extensively, whether via Facetime or via Viber. My conversations are now very punctual. I do not have the opportunity to participate in those family gatherings anymore, although they are still happening… The downside is that one gets more nostalgic for not being there while seeing everyone enjoying being together.<br>*R:* What do you feel nostalgia about?<br>*FAM1:* Not being there physically. There are many cases in which I would rather not see the video or be in front of the screen. I let them continue with their party while carrying on with my activities here. |

All interviewees suggested that the platforms they use shape their conversations and processes of storytelling in a number of ways. These are set out below.

***WhatsApp (N=11).*** The participating members of all six families reported using WhatsApp as one of their main applications for communicating at a distance with family members in Colombia and elsewhere. There was a pervasive sense that WhatsApp reminds them of their conversations when they were in Colombia. Instant, handy, informal, easy to use, are qualities the interviewees attributed to this app. It is precisely these qualities that the interviewees reported as enabling them to have constant and simultaneous communication with many members of their respective families. Two exemplary statements from the interview discussions are:

> **Family R:**
> *FRM1:* The collective dynamic that sometimes happened in face-to-face situations is now gone. It has moved to a platform such as WhatsApp which is spectacular... The collectivity remains but it has changed shape ... [An application] that offers more participation than Skype ... for instance, if I say something, at least I know that my dad will find out, my sister will find out, my brother will find out… that it is something that we could not do using Skype.

**Family L:**
*FLM1.* The most practical option was to gather all of them in one place and so when I share important information, I know I am sharing it with everyone. I did not have to write it 20 times in different places anymore... for me it is very important to share with them the news about my children, so if I take a picture, if we are somewhere… if there is an important event in my children's lives that I would like my family to experience with us, I can take a photo, record a video or a voice message and send it and share it… the fact is plain and simple, after my messages, everyone can say whatever s/he wants, like a conversation... but the truth is that we are the only ones that usually start conversations in chat ... we are, 99% of the time, who started the conversation.

***Telephone (N=7)*** As reported by all members of the participant families, telephone has always been there. It has been a useful medium communication, mostly in the initial years of their migration when Internet was not as easy to access as it is now. FA – Father in Colombia commented on the initial stages of telephone mediated family communication that most of the participant families experienced:

*FA- Father in Colombia:* When D emigrated, our communication was based on a single phone call every Saturday. We got ready for that call and the rest of the week we had no contact.

In addition, both FAM2 and FSM2 reported using telephone because their parents do not have the technological skills to deal with other platforms.

**Family A**
*FAM2:* I use telephone because my mother does not know anything about computers.

**Family S**
*FMS2:* I use telephone more frequently than Skype. My parents are not Skype-experts... It is the same with WhatsApp. My parents are not into texting. They do not give me many details when they text me.

Moreover, FRM1 and FS-Mother in Colombia reported that communication by telephone is limited because it is strictly restricted to the voice and there is no further exploration of other modes of expression such as nonverbal expressions or images.

**Family S**
*Mother in Colombia:* We used to call each other by phone… but it was not the same because we could not see each other's expressions. We did not know how they really were. Now, I can see them, see the house, and perceive the warmth of their home.

**Family R**
*FRM 1:* We used to speak only by phone, but we could not tell each other jokes over the phone. One tried to be brief, keep communicating what was happening here and there, give a precise summary. There were no details.

Despite its inherent limitations, one member of the participant families (FL-Mother in Colombia) did report feeling more comfortable using the telephone than any other platform. In her case, telephone seems to allow the illusion of being closer.

> *FL-Mother in Colombia:* The phone makes me go back in time when they were here, when they were three blocks away.

***Skype (N=6).*** The interviewees' perspectives about VoIP platforms were contradictory. The main point of contention centres on whether the use of Skype increases loneliness or whether it facilitates having intimate conversations that are sensory-limited. Two interviewees expressed views supporting the former (FL-Mother in Colombia and FZM2) and six advocated for the latter (FRM1, FRM2, FR– Mother in Colombia, FSM1, FS– Mother in Colombia, and FZM1). Expressing the loneliness view, one interviewee pointed out,

> *FL-Mother in Colombia:* I know that everyone is crazy about Skype saying that it is great. I have a colleague who has a daughter in Atlanta who has one-year-old twins. She gets connected every day at five in the afternoon and she sees the children... I am not satisfied with that. I am not satisfied with the ritual of seeing them, no, I am more of, being there physically, not being there technologically.

In contrast to this view, members of Family S spoke of the intimacy enhancing qualities of both Skype- and Xbox-based familial communications.

> *FS-Mother in Colombia:* Skype, video is more practical. You can see the expression of the other and be in the context of the history.
> *FSM1:* I have the Skype app in my console [Xbox] and 90% of the times when we talk we are sitting on the couch and it is more familiar, yes, more private, more like home environment…
> *FS-Mother in Colombia:* I like to see the environment in where they live.
> *FSM1*: Yeah, they can see everything because the camera moves if I move. It is a different experience. I like it better.

While supportive of VOIP platforms, the members of Family A pointed out that they had stopped using Skype and were now using faster applications such as Facetime that, in their view, adapt better to smartphones.

***Facebook (N=2).*** With the exception of the members of Family G who reported frequently using Facebook (after creating multiple private groups and adjusting privacy features), the Colombian-based members of the five other families viewed Facebook as a public platform that does not protect privacy, risks exposing their intimate conversations and stories. The majority of content these families upload in Facebook is intended for people outside the inner circle of their family. Some examples of the views expressed on Facebook include:

*FR-Mother in Colombia:* Facebook's philosophy remains wide open. I do not want the whole world to know my stuff…

*FL-Mother in Colombia:* Facebook no, really. I check it to see if my daughter has published something, but I really do not publish anything. I do not even know how to upload information. I do not like to have an open life where everyone has to know everything.

### 4.4 Summary

Members of participant families seem to have built a polymedia environment in which the most commonly used platforms are WhatsApp, Telephone and Skype. With alternative options being continuously considered, family members seek to determine the best way to communicate and interact digitally. This process allows them to assess the advantages and disadvantages of particular communication platforms in accordance with their respective communication experiences, needs and practices. The reported observations of the members of the participant families, suggest that they have adopted and integrated ICTs into their familial communicative activities. These technologies are shaped to fit the need of the families while simultaneously shaping the character of their communication. The discussion in the following chapter sets out the second part of the findings from the interviews. It gives an account of the participants' experiences in relation to technological affordances such as presence, interactivity and multimodality.

## Chapter 5: Family Storytelling Now

The discussion presented in this chapter sets out the empirically grounded findings obtained from the second part of interviews with the participant families. Specifically, their views regarding the dynamics of post-migration storytelling. The first section deals with participant's perspectives about being present during their digital interactions, the possible creation of a liminal, and how a contradictory sense of presence seems to exist with family members. The second part of the chapter deals with the ways in which family members navigate their communicative activities across platforms and stories. The final part of the discussion focuses on multimodality, the new modes by which stories are shared by the participant families.

### 5.1 All about Being Present

During the interview sessions, it quickly became apparent that for all the members of five participant families communication via ICTs means staying in touch to keep one another posted on latest developments, and, more importantly, to share daily life. The members of the sixth family, Family L, reported using ICTs only to inform each other about latest events. To this end, the members of five participant families reported that, in their exchanges, family members cook, eat, do household chores, help each other with homework, or play with the kids together. Some of the views expressed by these interviewees are presented below:

> **Family A:**
> *Father in Colombia:* It is as if they were here… since we could see each other through video, today is better because we can see what the other is going through, her/his mood or health through the observation of her/his face, well, we are always finding out the smallest detail of our family members.
> *R:* What do you mean by "it is as if they were there"?

*Father in Colombia:* We see each other daily. We talk to my daughter [who lives in the US] daily. We follow every detail on my grandson's growth, his gestures. In fact, although the child is 26 months, he recognizes us. We almost have a dialogue with him…

*FAM 1:* They even help her to bath him sometimes.
*Father in Colombia:* We are there even when they go walking, on the street, in the park, in the mall.

**Family G:**
*Sister in Colombia:* Do you remember last year when we did *La novena* [Christmas Advent Prayer in English] together via Skype?

*FGM1:* Oh yeah!

*Sister in Colombia.* We sang along and you were here with us… We passed around the little book and each of us (including you guys) read a section.

**Family R:**
*R:* What happens when you come together to talk [via Skype], how is it?
*Mother in Colombia:* Often, my son says: "I am about to feed the little girls. Look girls, stay here with grandma while I make dinner." So, I see them, talk to them… if they are in the mood for talking, then we talk, if not I am happy just for watching them.

**Family S:**
*FSM1:* What kind of alternative communication do I have with my brother? We play video games. We do not see each other via video but we play Call of Duty and at the same time we talk about our lives... using the microphone and the headphones… We talk about work, about how our parents are. It is like getting another version of the family in which I find out how everybody is going while doing what we both enjoy: playing.

**Family Z:**
*FZM1:* I talk to my mom as if we were in her kitchen.

*R:* Why? Tell me what happens.

*FZM1:* Isn't right Mommy that we talk as if we were in your kitchen?

*Mother in Colombia:* Oh yes, yes. What happens is that they have never left. They are here...

*FZM1:* In other words, when we talk, we are so connected that we have conversations such as the ones we used to have. The same fluidity, the same detail, as if we were there...

*Mother in Colombia:* I even have to tell her what we are going to eat, with detailed descriptions because she starts having cravings…

*R:* So you talk about recipes as well...

*FZM1.* Of course, about everything. Sometimes, she is here while I cook. I cook or wash while she is doing something else. We are doing things while we talk and we talk with the same fluency than before. There is a lack of physical contact but that affects our emotions rather than our communication.

The communication experiences outlined above seemingly echo Peñaranda Cólera's (2010) notion of transnational coexistence insofar as the interviewees' comments allude to experiencing technological proximity and connected presence. To this end, the technologically mediated communication practices of the members of five of the participating families suggest that their trasnational coexistence spreads to spaces beyond the house when they go to the park *together* to see how kids play or *attend* a party whether in Montreal or in Colombia. Two aspects of this transnational coexistence are pertinent to the discussion: the creation of a liminal space and a contradictory sense of presence. These are discussed below.

### 5.1.1 Liminal Spaces

The responses listed above offer a glimpse of the creation of a complex set of liminal spaces. The words and phrases used by 8 interviewees (e.g. FA-Father in Colombia "We are there even when they go walking, on the street, in the park, in the mall." FZ-Mother in Colombia "What happens is that they have never left. They are here.") suggest that during some of their familial digital communications walls, divisions, and geographical distances are somehow overcome and a new space created.

Upon completion of the interview with Family Z, its members spontaneously granted me access to a Skype-based family conversation that lasted for some two hours. Although the impromptu observations made by the researcher during this period lacked the methodological rigor of formal ethnographic participant observation, they nonetheless complement and inform some of the views reported above in Section 5.1. Below is a brief description of what the researcher observed:

After the interview, S [Family Z's 3-years-old daughter] was playing in the living room. Suddenly, in Colombia, L [the little cousin] approached the camera and said hello. Back in Montreal, S ran towards the computer to say hello as well. L said "A long-distance hug!!!" They moved closer to each other and each of them hugged the computer.
S went back to the living room. FZM1 and her mother in Colombia continued talking as if I was not there. They discussed some documents they needed to gather. Both of them seemed to be focused on the conversation although many other things were happening in their own houses at the same time.
Unexpectedly, S hid behind a wall and started calling her mother. FZM1 interrupted the conversation with her mother and turned the computer to face her daughter. She said, "Look mommy, S's new show". The father, FZM2, was now in the living room turning on the music. When the specific song started, S left her hiding place wearing a tutu. She "went onto the stage" and began dancing. FZM1 moved the computer to follow S's movements. While S was dancing, FZM1 explained to her mother that S loved that song and that she had now learned a new ballet move. The song was over. Applause sounded here and there. S smiled as her extended audience acclaims her.
FZM1 told her mother that we needed to leave. The computer went over the house so everyone (including me) could say good-bye. S kissed her grandma goodbye. Skype went off.

The above description of Family Z's Skype-mediated interaction reveals that all family members behaved as if there were no screen between them. One possible explanation is that they sense as if their house had an immaterial additional room where other members of their family live.

In the light of the spontaneous practices of the little girl from Family Z (i.e., S) that I observed, as well as other communicative practices reported by members of the other participant families mentioned above, it seems plausible that for these individuals, at least, the concept of distance needs to be re-conceptualized. Caron & Caronia's (2007) concept of delocalization, or the notion that space is becoming mobile, is seemingly latent in the dynamics of daily communication of these interview participants insofar as they can be here and there while living a transnational coexistence. For example, when S and her cousin hug

each other virtually, they seem to be neither here nor there.[30] For a short instance of spontaneous becoming these two children were in an ephemeral space in which they could be together.

The information emerging from the interviews with members of five participant families[31] suggests that concepts such as far and close, here and there, are somewhat fluid for these individuals. They each maintained that although home is in Montreal, when they engage with distant family members via platforms such as WhatsApp and Skype, the reach of their home seemingly expands beyond a particular edifice in a particular location. Indeed, the views expressed by these individuals implies that, for them, home transforms to include phenomenological experiences that can be extended to other spheres where feelings of safety, trust, freedom, community, and love also reside.

Another noteworthy aspect of the spatial dimensions of the participants' digitally mediated communication practices is that all members from four of the participant families (FA, FL, FR, FZ) reported that their current conversation and storytelling have somehow been altered after relatives living in Montreal have returned to Colombia or relatives living in Colombia have visited Montreal. Their observations are reproduced below.

> **Family A:**
> *R:* The fact that you, as parents, have come so many times [to Montreal] affects your communication with your son?
> *Father in Colombia:* Yes. It solidifies it because we know the places he usually goes to. We are now able to check google maps and find the place where he lives and places of interest.

[30] Particularly important here is the fact that during the informal observation, S's parents did not encourage her behaviour.

[31] Recall that the sixth family (L) reported using ICTs only to inform other family members about the latest events and did not mention any experience of transnational coexistence.

**Family L:**
*FLM1*: Our children can identify people although they have not seen them physically. For example, our son had only seen our family once, when we were last year in Colombia. However, when we arrived in Colombia, at the airport, he saw my dad and immediately greeted him, shook his hand and let him hug him as if he knew him because he had seen him via Skype. Now, every time my dad calls, my son immediately sees him, recognizes him. That is something I did not live with my family abroad when I was a child. I saw their photos, but I did not have a clear picture of them. In contrast, my son, a two-and-half small child, has a very clear image of their family members.

**Family R:**
*R:* You just said that the experience was different before you came to Canada or when they went back to Colombia. Could you explain yourself?
*Mother in Colombia:* The example is my older daughter… We used to talk to her about many things that happened in Canada, and she only nodded. She went to Canada recently and everything is different now. She now identifies places and the house because she saw them; she had the experience.
*R:* Do you think that changes the communication?
*Mother in Colombia:* Of course.
*R:* In what sense?
*FRM1:* It gives you ground. Every time they ask "where are you? Did you take the girls to the park?" they know that there is a park where we usually take the girls to… They know the places… It happens the same when we go there… We know the places too.

*FRM2:* See for example the case of my little sister. When my old sister came, my little sister had to stay home in Colombia for work. Then, in our chats in WhatsApp, every time we sent pictures or talked about some place, she reacted. She said: "that city is beautiful, I loved it, take them to xx place… do you remember when we went?"…that triggers many stories.

***

*FRM2:* [As for the kids] They have already become more familiar with them. The fact of seeing them physically supports the spontaneity, the naturalness, even the frequency of virtual conversations…

**Family Z:**
*FZM1:* There is indeed one thing that surprised me. Our daughter S is always reserved. However, in our second trip to Colombia, when S was about 20 or 22 months when we arrived at the airport S let everyone carry her, she did not have any problem with anyone… that surprised me… She feels that they are her family, she knows, intuitively, I think…

*FZM2:* After the second trip, every time she sees them on the screen, she says "I want to be there."

*FZM1:* Oh yes.

> *Mother in Colombia:* Oh yes, that makes me sad. If there is something here that draws her attention, she suddenly says that...
> *FSM1:* "I want to go there, I want to go there", she says… Another thing is that now she asks her grandma to show her around: the kitchen or her cousin's bedroom… It is as though she were reliving everything…

The individuals whose views are outlined above apparently evoke/re-live/recreate the spaces where they had lived or visited when engaging in digitally mediated conversations at a distance. Their responses suggest a distinction between the imagined space (i.e., the one that their relatives have described and explained but never lived-in and/or visited) and the evoked space (i.e., the space that after being lived-in and/or visited is recalled and relived by memories and stories). Bringing the evoking space into the conversation seems to invigorate the practice of storytelling among the participant families. Space, in other words, becomes alive: rooms may be re-occupied by recalling their smells, places may be gone over by bringing back memories and stories. In fact, the manner in which these individuals describe their technologically mediated long distance communication practices resonates with Lombard & Ditton's (1997) notion of presence as transportation insofar they are able to move from here to there and vice versa.

### 5.1.2 A Contradictory Sense of Presence

Among the views expressed by members of the five participant families who identified as having experienced transnational coexistence, two contending perspectives emerge. The first was shared by all members of families G, S, R as well as one Montreal-based family member and one Colombia-based parent from both Family A and Family Z. These twelve individuals view ICTs as bridges connecting here and there. To this end, they reported frequently forgetting they are using a technological device to communicate and that they get lost in their

memories and stories. In other words, Lombard & Ditton's (1997) 'The perceptual illusion of nonmediation' is a characteristic of their long distance communicative practices with other family members. The words of the Colombia-based mother in Family S aptly illustrates this point:

> It is important that this family tie does not break. It is as though they were here. Then, everything that happens with his siblings, his cousins, his grandma, we tell him. We love to hear what happens to them, what they have lived, how their work is going, how they are doing. We saw each other frequently. For me, it was very important to have this communication via Skype because I am a very loving mom and I suffered much by their absence. However, since I managed to communicate and see them I feel as if I had them in front of me by looking at their expressions… I almost touch them through the screen. Besides, it allows me this emotional part that goes back and forth so we stay very close and keep that emotional bond that we have.

One member of Family A and another from Family Z, along with the Colombia-based mother in Family L shared an opposing view. These three individuals expressed sensing a high level of disconnection from their families and the situations they are experiencing together when using ICTs to communicate at a distance. They reported not being able to let themselves succumb to the illusion of nonmediation. Instead, they are keenly aware of the technical features of the devices meditating their long distance communicative exchanges. Some of the issues they identified included, the distortion/lack of sound or video, interferences, the speed of the Internet connection, and a heightened sense of loneliness once the webcam is turned off. In other words, these individuals tended to focus foremost on the discontinuities in ICT mediated communication as opposed to its advantages. Some of the concerns they articulated are reproduced below:

> **Family A:**
> *FAM2:* Let's say, communication is still the same, but contact is not. Obviously, it is not the same to be here [in Montreal] and see your mother once or twice a year. The first time I saw her after migrating it had been three years, so it is not the same situation as when we were in Colombia and see each other every weekend. Obviously, that hits

you. With the rest of my family, my immediate family, interaction has also been affected because, for example, before coming here I was very close to my nephew… I saw him every weekend. Now, we have lost contact. He is not as expressive talking by phone as he is in person, so our conversations are now very monosyllabic, and we do not have much to talk about. It was completely different when I went to Colombia recently… In a certain way, I feel like an outsider. No matter how updated I am or how much we talk about everything, I now feel that my role is not entirely relevant.

**Family Z:**
*R:* In your case, are you connected when they celebrate birthdays?

*FZM2:* Yes.

*R:* And what happens there?

*FZM2:* I feel completely set aside.

*R:* Why?

*FZM2:* Because they are living it and I do not. Do you remember when you [FZM1] and S went to Colombia and there was my aunt's birthday? I got connected, but, I mean, I stayed there, staring at the screen all alone because, well, it was a party, communication was via cell phone; we hardly listened to each other, then I talked to nobody… And look, if I remember correctly, it has always been the same. For example, at D's wedding, we got connected via cell phone, they had a cell phone, obviously, we listened well, but they did not hear anything because they were in the party. Then, we ended up listening to whatever random conversation. They put the cell phone in any place and when someone approached we were lucky. They talked to us two words and left us alone again!!! They continued doing whatever they were doing. I do not really like that kind of situations…

In sum, those viewing ICTs as a bridge that connects here and there fondly recollected a warm and affectionate environment in Colombia where storytelling took place during narrative and non-narrative talk and which continues despite distance and time. These individuals feel comfortable conversing with other family members via digital technologies, and familial stories apparently flow easily. Contrastingly, for those who perceive ICTs as an obstacle to connect here to there, the communicational bond is seemingly disrupted by technical glitches and other technical malfunctions.

### 5.2 Their Narratives Now: Extractive Interactivity

When asked about the dynamics of communication and the level of participation of family members during post-migration digital interactions, all members from the six families pointed out having a sense that the number of participants in their long distance communications is decreasing and becoming more limited. The view expressed by FRM1 is exemplary. In his words,

> I feel that we have lost our collective communication… What I mean by that is that now, for example, it is very difficult to congregate many of us to talk as we did before. I believe that there are limitations or communication barriers because sometimes we try, say, via Skype, to get many people together. My mom gets connected by Skype and put the computer in the room where my old sister, my little sister, my dad, and my brother in law are, but people get dispersed; rarely is everyone focused on the screen.

Ten of the Montreal-based interviewees reported that their respective Colombian-based parents are now the center of their digital communication practices. With the exception of Family G, in which daily communication occurs between sisters, the participants' observations suggest that siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles are now only satellites of the main communication act that takes place digitally.[32] The same ten Montreal-based interviewees implied that in talking to their mothers and, in some cases, fathers, during their long distance digitally mediated communications, they are reviving the bond they had already constructed. The following comment by FSM2 echoes the views of the other nine interviewees who also expressed having this sense. In her words,

> I would say that the family core is lost a little because… you talk more with your parents than with your brothers. They are not always there; they are working; they are studying; they have different schedules; then we are no longer all together but only

[32] Recall that all participants reported that siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles, as well as their parents, were active participants of their communicational events when they lived in Colombia.

with our parents. However, when parents are there, it is as if the whole family were there.

Another noteworthy observation is that when describing the dynamics of their post-migration digital communication, the same ten members from five of the participant families reported frequently having multiple on going WhatsApp chats.[33] These individuals stated that they created family chats to share news about the kids, family updates, and plans for the future. The following offers two examples of their reported experiences:

**Family L:**
*Mother in Colombia:* Now, since we all have smartphones, we have multiple WhatsApp chats. We have one family group composed by my daughter, her husband, FLM2's parents and I ... I also have another group with my daughter, my sister, and my nephew.
*FLM2:* I have no particular chat with my parents, but there is a family WhatsApp chat (Chaparritos) in which I can talk to my parents, my sister, my cousins, my aunts, and my uncles.

**Family R**
*FRM1:* We have several chats: one for my family, one for FRM2's family, one for both of them. We even created a chat for a group of relatives with whom we travel in a cruise last year. We are almost 17 people. The idea took form at the beginning of the cruise and still exists. We are still sharing our travel experiences, as well as updates of our daily lives.

The comments of these ten participants suggest that they segment their audiences into different chat groups in accordance with who is on the other side (i.e., siblings, parents, cousins, aunts, etc.). It seems plausible, therefore, that narratives and stories are iteratively constructed and dispersed across different chat groups. In order to create a complete landscape of their families' narratives, members must seemingly gather each story, quilt them together in narratives and create a meaning of them all in a permanent on-going conversation.

[33] The members of Family S are the exception. They reported only using WhatsApp when communications via Skype is not possible.

This dynamic appears to aligned with Lunenfeld' (1999) notion of extractive interactivity insofar as the comments and observations of these interviewees suggest that they get themselves involved in processes of non-stopped "hypertextual navigation" in which they search and create their family narratives by elaborating their own hypertexts and stitching together multiple stories.

All members of the participant families reported that their digitally mediated family storytelling took place across multiple spaces and situations. These individuals also pointed out that their family narratives are seemingly rooted in numerous interwoven storylines that individuals consume and construct in putting together various story-related elements involving chat texts, videos, photos, and/or live exchanges. This individual work, apparently empowers each participant in the elaboration of family narratives while simultaneously giving rise to some challenges. For instance, FAM1 and FLM2 noted that they each often receive WhatsApp texts from family members during their office hours, which they frequently decided to ignore. They reported that this failure to engage sometimes causes confusion with regard to the stories being told. Their comments are provided below.

> **Family A:**
> *FAM1:* My family has a chat. They are continuously sending messages; mostly my aunts. Sometimes is overwhelming because it is too much information. Sometimes I decide to stop reading and after a while I end up having hundreds of unread messages. They talk about everything and sometimes I do not understand or know what they are talking about.
>
> **Family L:**
> *FLM2:* I simply cannot read everything when it is sent. Many times I need to go back and read the old messages to find out what is going on.

Likewise, FAM2, FGM1, and FSM2 mentioned that not every member of their respective families has the same technical abilities. This sometimes leads to their digitally mediated

familial communications being constrained. Their observation echoes the notion of digital divides, especially with regard to the importance of technological proficiency levels for facilitating family members accessing, searching, processing, using, and giving meaning to digital content. This raises the possibility that a lack of technological abilities may prevent some members from accessing all stories, creating new narratives and/or being active participants in the digitally mediated storytelling activities of their respective families.

### 5.3 Their Stories Now: A Multimodal Transformation

Digital storytelling among the members of the participant families apparently takes place in an environment in which families experience a contradictory sense of presence, and create liminal spaces within virtual interactions. Moving from the dynamics of their communication practices to the content of their digital stories, the information presented in Table 5.1 shows the topics of conversation reported by the interviewees as being touched upon during periods of digitally mediated communication between family members.

**Table 5.1 Topics of Conversation Now**

| ***Topic of conversation*** | ***Example quotes*** |
|---|---|
| **Daily Life (feelings, health, events)** *(N=13)* | **Family A:** *FAM2*: With my mother, we talk about our days. We tell each other what we have for lunch, what we eat for dinner, where we go, how everything goes. |
| **The Kids** *(N=8)* | **Family R:** *Mother in Colombia:* In our case, we want to know how the kids are, how they have evolved, what they have learned.<br><br>**Family L:** *FLM1:* In the conversations with my parents, the main topic, almost the only one, was the kids… what worries me the most, what I try to do every time is that they see the kids; that the kids say hello to them; that they talk to them, that they send them kisses, blah, blah, blah… |

| | |
|---|---|
| **News (and gossip) about other relatives** *(N=6)* | **Family A***:* *FAM2:* 75% to 90% of the times in the conversations I have with my mom, we talk about what she has heard about the other members of the family. She is, let's say, the communication bridge between my sisters because I do not talk to them as much as I should. On the contrary, my mom speaks to them daily so she becomes the connection between us. |
| **Recipes** *(N=3)* | **Family L:** *Mother in Colombia:* We still share photos and videos, but mainly recipes. My daughter is always asking 'mom how do you make this or that'… and every time she talks to my mother in law she always asks her about her cooking secrets. |
| **Politics (country current affairs)** *(N=2)* | **Family A:** *FAM1:* [Addressing his father in Colombia] It is very frequent that you and my sister talk about the news. You even read the newspaper together, right?<br><br>**Family G:** *FM 1:* What I ask the most to my family is about Colombian situation. They know better because here you do not get the whole story. |
| **Other topics mentioned…** *(N=1 for each item listed)* | Plans for the future<br>Expressions of love<br>The weather<br>Soccer<br>Work |

The material presented in Table 5.1 reflects the fact that none of the interviewees made any mention of the classical genres of family storytelling discussed in Chapter 2. Indeed, the participant families seem to have a very limited post-migration repertoire of stories that adhere to classical storytelling categories. To this end, the reported topics of conversation in which the participants' family stories seem to revolve parallel those that emerged during the pre-migration gatherings and dinners in Colombia. As expressed by the interviewees, the members of their respective families continue talking about their daily lives, family gossip, and current affairs in Colombia. With the exception of Families G and S who do not have children, a recurring subject of conversation and storytelling among the members

of the other participant families now includes children.[34] These experiences seem to align to the notion that storytelling may also occur through non-narrative talk during the participants digital interactions with other family members.

Although the topics of post-migration conversation are reported as having remained essentially unchanged, the modes, or the units of expression and representation (Rowsell, 2013, p. 6), being used by family members to convey their narratives has altered. According to all members of the participant families, when they were living in Colombia family stories were mainly conveyed orally. In other words, verbal and nonverbal language was the main modes in face-to-face conversations. By contrast, all of the interviewees acknowledged that engaging in the sharing of photos, texts, emoticons, animations, graphic images such as memes, audio messages, and videos via WhatsApp have become commonplace in their communicative practices.[35] For instance, FAM1 observed,

> Usually, what I do is to record a video or take a picture on my cell phone while I am in a plaza or some interesting place in a new city. Then, when I get connected to Wi-Fi, I send it to them. That allows them to check on how I am and to see the places I am visiting. It is a short video or a photo by which we can share some moments.

Both Family L and Family R, gave the researcher access to their families' WhatsApp chat groups for a period of one week following from the initial interview. The observations garnered from examining these exchanges sheds some light on the use of new modes during the digitally mediated conversations of these two families.

[34] At the time of their interview, the Montreal-based members of Family S were expecting their first child, and observed that child rearing and children were becoming increasingly prominent elements of their long distance digitally mediated familial communications.

[35] Recall, Yang (2012) maintains that images, animation, music, gestures, speech, writing, hypertexts, sound, gaze, videos, and posture in embodied interaction can be considered as modes.

### 5.3.1 Texts and Emoticons: Stories with a Shared Code

The members of all six families reported sending intra-family texts via the WhatsApp app. The discussion presented below draws from an analysis of Family L's WhatsApp chat log during the period spanning September 25 to October 2, 2015. The sampled chat is a chronicle of a trip in which a family member, 'M', is returning to her home in Colombia after having spent some time at FLM2's (J in the chat) home in Montreal. The family's chat messages were exchanged in the "Chaparritos" chat group and enabled M's family members to both follow and travel along with her until she reached her final destination. During M's journey, other conversations also took place: E's birthday; M's encounter with S, an old friend who is seemly well known by other members of the family; and the lunar eclipse. Although an informal observation was carried out during one week, for the sake of convenience only the exchanges that came about during M's trip (from September 26 to 28) are provided below.[36] The conversations that took place via this medium illustrate the chatty tone, the common code, and the evocative character of the digital stories exchanged among family members over a three-day period.[37]

*Sat, Sep 26*
J (5:44 a.m.): M just did check-in and entered immigration. I just said goodbye to her. 😢
Thank you, Tila Maia, come back soon.
E (5:45 a.m.): Have a nice trip. 🐸🐸🐸
J (5:46 a.m.): When you have the chance, please let us know that you arrive safely to Houston.
ME (5:47 a.m.): M, have an excellent trip. God bless you.
A (5:47 a.m.): Have a nice trip M.

[36] The texts in this particular chat log adhere to a chronological order and storyline that is easy for non-family members to follow and understand without any prior context or background.

[37] The conversation originally took place in Spanish. This is an English language translation produced by the researcher, along with the best approximation possible of the original emoticons.

ME (6:00 a.m.): B, Happy Birthday. 🐸 🫎 👍God bless you.
J (6:18 a.m.): Happy birthday batrachian. 🐸🎆 🎂
M (6:31 a.m.): I am in the departure lounge.
Batrachian, happy birthday yuh uu uu 🎂🎁🎉 + hug
AN (6:32 a.m.): Sister, have a great trip.
M (6:33 a.m.): Thank you. Why are you guys awake so early?
J (6:33 a.m.): I think I woke them up letting them know that you were at the airport.
AN (6:35 a.m.): Because the ring of the messages woke us up… 😯🛫🛫
(7:42 a.m.) Hugs to CL's family and thank you for welcoming M. 👍
J (7:43 a.m.): Hugs to all batrachians. We wait and welcome everyone who wants to come.
AN (7: 52 a.m.): Thank you, son. We hope to visit you as soon as possible.
L (8:09 a.m.): Happy Birthday batrachian!!!
E (8:11 a.m.): Thank you very much to all 🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸.
A (8:18 a.m.): Hahaha
AN (8:18 a.m.): 🐸 Happy birthday, have a nice day 🐸🎉👏
Mau (8:42 a.m.): Happy Birthday 🐸🐸🐸
j (8:50 a.m.): Hello old-batrachian, happy birthday and may God give you more years of life. Hugs. 🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸🐸
Ma (8:55 a.m.): Happy birthday batrachian
May you have many more. Party big
j (9:17 a.m.): Hello, son. Good morning to this great family. Please, M is traveling in which airline? Big hugs
J (10:59 a.m.): She is traveling on United.
M (11:32 a.m.): Hello everybody. I am in Houston now.
L (11: 32 a.m.): Wow. Super.
J (11: 54 a.m.): Great. I am glad to know that you arrived well.
When S woke up, he asked me about you.
He was a little sad.
M (1: 10 p.m.): PHOTO Look, with my lifelong friend
J (1: 27 p.m.): Cool. I am glad that you guys could see each other
j (2:58 p.m.): A special greeting from us to S, it is nice to see her well. A hug.
Mau (3:05 p.m.): Greetings.
(3:16 p.m.) Long-time no see.
ME (3:24 p.m.): What a cool meeting. When you write her, please let her know that we always remember her fondly R…
Ma (6:48 p.m.): Say hello to S ✌
M (7:00 p.m.): S says hello to all batrachians. She asks when she should schedule *La novena*? 😉
Mau (7:31 p.m.): Whenever she wants. 👍
L (7:42 p.m.): Whenever she sends us the airline tickets we will be there
J (8: 10 p.m.): There, there is none.

Ma (8:34 p.m.): 😋😁😁😁😁
M (10:55 p.m.): I am again at the airport 😬
L (11:08 p.m.): You know
M (11:09 p.m.): I don't understand L 🙇
j (11:10 p.m.): No one understands her. That's normal for her.

*Sun, Sep 27*

M (12:42 a.m.): I am on the plane. See you tomorrow 😔😔😔😔
L (12:51 a.m.): Get some sleep
ME (1:01 a.m.): M, I thought you were in Bogota. At what do you arrive?
(1:04 a.m.) Have a nice trip
M (5:33 a.m.): I am here 😋
ME (5:36 a.m.): Welcome 👍🐸😋
j (6:48 a.m.): Hello all batrachians. As we were the only ones who woke up early because of M, we wanted to let you know that she is now relaxing in our apartment. (THE MESSAGE IS REPEATED TWICE) 😠😠😠😠😃😃😃😃
A (6:51 a.m.): Nice
E (7:21 a.m.): Good morning batrachian C 😋🐸🐸🐸
J (7:41 a.m.): Good to know that you arrived well and that a responsible adult (well two) went to pick you up.
E (7:41 a.m.): To all 🐸🐸🐸, thank you very much for your birthday messages. 🎉🎉🎉
…
L (10:09 p.m.): See the moon
(10:10 p.m.) It is almost red
Mau (10:11 p.m.): Now
(10:12 p.m.)It is red
L (10:16 p.m.): Yessss. Super
M (10:22 p.m.): Fili, are you watching it?
(10:23 p.m.) It is almost over [Translation is not literal due to the use of typical Colombian words]
J (10:23 p.m.): Yes. I am coming
M (10:23 p.m.): PHOTO
(10:24 p.m.) Here in the entrance of your parents' building.
(10:24 p.m.) It is f* cold…
J (10:25 p.m.): haha
J (10:25 p.m.): PHOTO
My cell phone camera is not very good.
E (10:41 p.m.): PHOTO
M (10:48 p.m.): Wow awesome camera, batrachian
ME (10:50 p.m.): Batrachians it looks good but the camera has not a good resolution

*Mon, Sep 28*

M (12:01 p.m.): My dear family, I wanted to let you know that I am now in Manizales 😊
J (12:03 p.m.): Cool M, I hope you can rest a little before going back to work. Thank you for your visit
E (12:05 p.m.): Well done batrachian. Have a good day 🐸🐸🐸
M (12:09 p.m.): PHOTO
E (12:12 p.m.): At least the flight controller has not left his work to eat breakfast. It happened a few days ago and the plane had to go back.
M (12:15 p.m.): hahaha 😉
L (12:17 p.m.): That happened last week in Manizales
L (12:23 p.m.): 😆
j: EMPTY AUDIO MESSAGE
AN (3:44 p.m.): Tia Maia, we are glad that everything went well. Hugs
L (8:26 p.m.): Thank you, cousins. Your gifts are awesome
J (8:26 p.m.): With lots of love. It was nothing
L(8:27 p.m.): They are drawing. And the other is perfect for Halloween. I hope they make through until the 31.
J (8:27 p.m.): hahaha. I hope so too.
(8:35 p.m.) S is drinking a yogurt and he just remembered that Tila Maia had a very big yogurt.
AN (8:59 p.m.): Tia Maia also remembered them in Bogota and told us how calm and well behaved they are. She told us that they are such two angels. They are so cute. 😊😇😇😈😈
J (9:05 p.m.): Yeah sure!!! Very calm. 😵
AN (9:13 p.m.): hahaha

One of the immediately noticeable aspects of these exchanges is that they are characterized by a warm tone; as if participants were talking to one another orally. This seemingly eases the turn-taking – in an almost natural back-and-forth exchange – as well as the overall fluidity of the digital interaction. One might almost 'hear' the different voices of those engaged in these chats, guess their ages, and potentially speculate about their technological prowess. As might be expected, emoticons are also used to reinforce ideas, to convey expressions and set a tone.

It also appears that the messages in this chat are built using a common code that external observers are unlikely to fully understand. The participants in the exchanges

frequently mentioned nicknames such as Tila Maia, Batrachian, and Fili that give an intimate tone to the conversation. Likewise, in the non-translated text (i.e., the original Spanish language exchanges) Colombian idioms and slang likely used only within the context of Family L are present. In addition, the participants share encrypted jokes. For example,

> AN (8:59 p.m.): Tia Maia also remembered them [J's kids] in Bogota and told us how calm and well behaved they are. She told us that they are such two angels. They are so cute. ☺👼👼😺😺
> J (9:05 p.m.): Yeah sure!!! Very calm. 😭
> AN (9:13 p.m.): hahaha

The meaning of this joke apparently evokes a complex history of offline conversations and previous experiences. The chat participants also refer to spaces known by all participants to possibly take them to a trip of memories about lived places and shared moments. For example

> M (10:24 p.m.) Here in the entrance of your parents' building.
> (10:24 p.m.) It is f* cold…
> J (10:25 p.m.): haha).

It seems plausible that such terms, expressions, and mentions likely create a familial and informal environment within which everybody is comfortable.

The tone and the creation of a shared code in Family L's WhatsApp chat can be seen as the way members of this particular family weave their narratives. These texts are an open door to other times and spaces in which the chat participants lived common experiences. Words and emoticons are not only online acts of communication but also portals to offline events that are continuously re-created and re-told. In other words, it seems plausible that in this case texts can be considered as evocative stories that create a *cadavre exquis*, an amalgam of memories and reminiscences that locate words beyond the chat, giving them a hypertextual

character connected to alternative times and social spaces. Evocative stories that shape a narrative that only Family L can understand.

### 5.3.2 E-Photos: Stories about Collective Meanings

As noted above, each member of the six participant families reported sending photos via the WhatsApp app. Sixteen interviewees also mentioned that they send photos just after taking them or as soon as they get connected to the Internet. These individuals claimed to send photos without any prior editing so as include family members living abroad as quickly as possible into the moments and events of their lives.

The two Montreal-based members of Family S are the exception of this practice. They noted preferring to choose the best of their photos to send on to family members so as to provide a good summary of their experience(s). To this end, they reported usually sending photos a few days after a particular activity/event had taken place. In the words of FSM2,

> I try to send the best photo, one of both of us, or one in which I look well. Now more than ever, because I am pregnant, I know how important it is for my family to see me healthy and happy. We try to send the best in which everything fits: the landscape, us… It will make them feel that we are ok.

By selecting photos to send FSM2 is likely creating an image of her life in Montreal that corresponds to an image she wishes to convey and maintain.

All the interviewees reported engaging in conversations with members of their respective families after photos had been sent or received. The following example provides an inventory of the photo exchanges and related discussions that had taken place in Family

R's WhatsApp chat group between September 12 and 19, 2015.[38] The accounts of this informal observation shed some light on how photos are shared and discussed.

*Saturday, September 12, 2015.*

FRM1 (7:10 p.m.): *A picture of two girls. They are posing outside a residential complex, under the rain, wearing jackets and sharing an umbrella. They both are smiling and looking at the camera.*

Mother, you took summer with you 😒😠😊😉

FRM 1 (7:12 p.m.): *A picture of the FRM1 and FRM2. They are also posing, smiling, wearing raincoats and hoods, looking at the camera. In the back, there is the same residential complex.*

W (7:18 p.m.): Very nice, all of you!!! God bless you.

E (7: 34 p.m.): 👍

CE: So cute!

*Sunday, September 13, 2015.*

M (8:29 a.m.): Rain is also fun!

C (8:45 a.m.): *Series of photos of a little child. The first photo shows the child sitting down in a pile of green plastic chairs on the shore of (what looks like) a lake. She is not looking at the camera while smiling. The second photo shows the face of the same child in a close up. Again the child is not looking at the camera. The third is a photo collage (with Retrica logo in the lower corner) in which the first photo is repeated four times. The fourth photo shows a woman carrying the child. This last one is also a photo collage (with Retrica logo in the lower corner) in which four photos are put together with light differences between shots. Both the women and the child are standing by the lake.*

FRM1 (8:53 a.m.): Beautiful E + a series of emojis of animals.

FRM2 (10:50 a.m.): So beautiful!! 😊 + an "in-loved face".

FRM1 (1:07 p.m.): *A photo of FM1 wearing a mask and a wig. He is apparently in a store. The photo is out of focus.*

CE (1: 50 p.m.): Haha, getting ready for Halloween.

NO MESSAGES ON ON MONDAY SEPTEMBER 14, TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 15 OR WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 16, 2015

[38] Only descriptions of the photos are presented here so as to maintain the anonymity of the family members and their messages.

*Thursday, September 17, 2015*

FRM1 (6:43 p.m.): *A photo of FM2 posing with her volleyball gear. One can see that she is smiling and looking at the camera although part of her face is out of frame.*

We now have a volley player. After a long break 😉

B (6:45 p.m.): Super.

E (6:45 p.m.): 👍

R (6:48 p.m.): Hello my dear daughter! How are you guys? I am about to call you!!

FRM1 (6:55 p.m.): Ms. R. FRM2 went playing volley. She is playing on Thursdays at 7 p.m.

J (6:56 p.m.): 😊

E (6:58 p.m.): One has to fortify one's knees, do many squats. We are not 20 years anymore. To avoid injuries.

R (7:02 p.m.): Good!!! It was about time.

C (7:05 p.m.): Well done FRM2!!!! Go on and exploit your volley abilities.

FRM1 (7:24 p.m.): Hey cousin!!! You are the real authority in volley!!!

E (7:25 p.m.): You know, cousin!!!

*Friday, September 18, 2015*

FRM1 (6:47 p.m.): *A photo of two girls. They are standing in a garden near a row of bushes. They are hugging each other facing and smiling at the camera.*

+ A cloud.

CE (6:49 p.m.): *A series of three photos show a huge playground surrounded by stores. The playground is a gigantic pool full of plastic balls with slides and inflatable bouncers.*

J (6:54 p.m.): Wow!!! That is crazy!!!

CE (7:01 p.m.): Haha. In Santa Fe [a commercial mall]. We will go when kids come.

J (7:03 p.m.): Looks cool.

CE (7:05 p.m.): Another angle of the same playground.

FRM1 (7:05 p.m.): 👍😉😉

NO MESSAGES ON SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 19, 2015

Based on the exchanges presented above it seems that the meaning of a photo expands and becomes a story itself through the act of sharing and commenting upon it. This claim is supported by FRM1's observation that in the post-photo sharing conversations,

> we add translations, additional information so people understand contexts… sometimes the message is clear enough so we do not say anything… sometimes we

> add emoticons because we do not have time and we need to be brief expressing our emotions.

All members of the six participant families indicated expecting their familial counterparts to comment upon and to start discussions around shared photos so as to allow the stories behind photos emerge.

One particularly noteworthy facet of storytelling that six interviewees reported experiencing thanks to their family photos takes place when the photos are seen again at some future time. The observations of two interviewees are illustrative of this experience:

> **Family S:**
> *Mother in Colombia:* I keep them and I show them to my husband, or to his brothers once in a while. I keep them and sometimes I pick a special one and upload it to see it all the time on my screen.
>
> **Family L:**
> *FLM1:* One hardly showed photos in Colombia. If you had gotten married or had traveled, then you would have sat down and showed your photos once and that would have been it. It was a special circumstance. Nowadays, sharing photos prevails. My mom, aunts, uncles, brother-and-sisters-in-laws, my parents-in-laws are carrying a photo, a video, or an audio of the kids all the time, although they do not live together.
> *Mother in Colombia:* It is true. Now I enjoy myself watching the pictures they send me… I show them to my coworkers, to my sister, to my mother-in-law…

These responses seemingly resonate with Baldassar's (2008) suggestion that photos can become transnational objects embodying those who are somehow away. It is possible that the tangibility of these photos connects the one that keeps them and re-sees them to the real body of the absent individual and conducts an emotion or sense of proximity. Further, the ways in which the interview participants reported treasuring, archiving, re-using and re-living photos, can be seen as supporting Sontag's (2005) claim that photographs are a way

of imprisoning an inaccessible or remote reality, not only to reproduce the real but also to recycle it, create new usages, and assign new meanings.

An additional hypothesis that can be drawn is that beyond their attributes as technical objects, photographs are complemented by a collective process of fluctuating meanings that allow them to be filled with stories. This may account for why these families discuss their photos; photos are sent to be looked, told, listened to, and, frequently, re-narrated. In this collective process of meaning-making, photos are likely touched and influenced by the one that sends them with an intention, the one that organizes and archives them, the one that narrates them, the one that re-sees them. In sum, it is in the act of mixing images with words, memories, pieces of the present, and family meanings that photographs seem to reach a multimodal shape in the process of digital storytelling that these six participant families experience.

### 5.4 Summary

For the members of the participant families ICTs seem to become the intersection, the liminal space that comes to live through interactions and social practices. However, the sense of presence is full of contradictions. In other words, "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997) is not a natural condition for all members of the participant families. Along with the sense of presence, all participant families mentioned interactivity as an important aspect of their current communication via ICTs. The participants reported getting themselves involved in a permanent "hypertextual navigation" in which they seemingly search and create their family narratives by elaborating their own hypertexts and stitching together diverse stories. Finally, the members of the participant families pointed out

new forms of storytelling beyond classical categories insofar as their topics seem to be similar to those reported prior to migration but the modes being used to express them have extended to include such things as texts, emoticons and digital photos.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the technologically mediated communication and digital storytelling practices of six Colombian families who immigrated to Canada in recent years. The starting point for this study was the idea that emigrants may experience diaspora as a state of mind and transnationalism as a way of interacting, and use storytelling as the intersection to create and recreate themselves. To date, much of the literature about the migration and family communication of Colombians has focused on the post-migration transformation of family structures, the impact of migration on parenting practices, the practice of care among different generations, and the structural inequalities affecting family migration. In order to shed greater light on the role of ICTs in family storytelling, this thesis engaged with six migrant families to understand how they have experienced technological affordances in relation to their storytelling practices. The empirical evidence presented in this thesis suggests that storytelling continues to take place during the digital exchanges of the participant families and that technological affordances such as presence, interactivity, and multimodality play a role in defining stories, creating narratives, was well as framing the practice of storytelling.

Chapter 2 set out the theoretical foundations of the thesis. Chapter 3 outlined the methodological approach and the techniques employed to undertake the research as well as my reflections about issues affecting my interpretation of the collected data. Chapter 4 focused on the participant families' storytelling dynamics in Colombia and their relationship with ICTs. Chapter 5 dealt with the post-migration dynamics of their storytelling and how technological affordances affect these experiences. This final chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section the research question guiding this thesis is addressed in the light

of the research findings. In the second section, the limitations of the research are discussed. The thesis concludes by considering directions for future research in this domain.

### 6.1 Between Catalyzing and Constraining

The central question guiding this thesis was: *How do ICTs catalyze and constrain storytelling within transnational families?* The evidence gathered from this thesis suggests that the routine and consistent use of digital communicative applications and platforms among the participant families influences in myriad ways how their respective members define stories, create narratives, as well as the practice storytelling itself.

The views reported by one group of participant family members, composed of 12 of the 18 interviewees, suggest that their storytelling processes are catalyzed by ICTs in situations when presence is experienced and/or new multimodal forms of communication are explored. These individuals view the applications and platforms as both bridges connecting 'here with there' and as creating liminal social spaces for exchanging stories and narratives. Their physical space is seemingly transformed when family members admit one another into their homes via ICTs despite their bodies being miles away; when they hug each other despite the obtrusiveness of the screen; when they invite each other to be part of their daily life by regularly sharing photos, texts or videos; and when they 'travel' without their bodies from here to there to almost smell the aroma of the coffee in the pot. For some, walls, geographical frontiers, and physical distances reportedly evaporate through of the creation of these technologically mediated liminal spaces. These liminal spaces contribute to transforming storytelling practices insofar as when inhabiting this immaterial domain family members are able to recreate elements of face-to-face interactions that seem to foster familial storytelling.

The participants for whom the illusion of non-mediation, or presence, is activated report enjoying dinners together, throwing parties, celebrating traditions, and having intimate conversations while some are here and others are there. They appear to be able to connect themselves with the flux of stories while reliving some of the moments they, as families, treasure the most. According to the views expressed by these individuals, the recreation of familial moments and events via digital applications and platforms is particularly crucial for those who have children because these situations are perceived as the core of 'familyhood', or *familismo,* wherein stories and narratives can be easily shared.

One example emerging from the interviews about the role of presence as transportation in the process of storytelling, relates to the photos family members share with each other. According to the interviewees, family members exchange photos, in part, because they always want to be present, revive memories, and live their daily lives together. Family photos are a way of narrating their lives and themselves in the physical absence of loved ones who reside elsewhere. Having near instantaneous access to photos contributes to a sense of *almost* being there. Photos, and the stories behind them, create a type of experience that can be kept, shared, re-told, and re-created. Within the context of the six participant families the value of photos resides foremost in their capacity to contain collective and fluctuating meanings. To this end, photos, catalyze the process of storytelling by establishing a new set of modes to tell stories. The photo is not the story itself. Rather, a story emerges when the photo navigates different devices and platforms, when it is re-seen thousand times, when it is discussed, when it is re-told and shown to others. In other words, digital storytelling creates a new composition where texts, voice, and images are put in motion through the use of photos.

The observations of the participant family members within this 'ICTs as catalyst' group also suggest that multimodality informs their storytelling practices. The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the traditional definition of stories and the classical categories of storytelling genres do not adhere to the experiences of these individuals. Indeed, the information gathered from the interviews suggests that the traditional definition of stories may require some updating to better reflect the fact that in the so-called information age family stories: (i) now involve collective meanings created by everyone; (ii) reflect a shared code (i.e., something that only the family can understand) that involves words, acts, looks, and/or references linking the current conversation to a shared and common history; (iii) involve new modes of expression and representation beyond verbal language and face-to-face interaction. For these participants, technologically mediated communicative exchanges seemingly contribute to the creation of new kinds of stories that are nourished by the mundane character of the transnational coexistence these families experience. One possible hypothesis to be drawn from this finding is that the types of non-narrative talk fostered and sustained by digital communicative applications and platforms offers an important medium through which to redefine stories and storytelling.

The views expressed by a second, smaller, group of participants (N= 6) points to the potential for technological mediation to constrain family storytelling, especially in situations where ICTs are seen to disrupt the connection between 'here and there' and/or when extractive interactivity cannot be practiced by everyone. Interviewees who reported viewing technology as an obstacle to interpersonal communication and who refute the possibility of an illusion of nonmediation preceive digital communicative applications and platforms as constraints on familial storytelling. For these individuals, the physical distance separating

them from loved ones is like an abyss that impedes any sense of direct connection. While recognizing ICTs as key mediums of communication with their family members, technological malfunctions such as noise, interference, lack of speed connection, and poor quality video are constant reminders of physical separation. In addition, these individuals report experiencing a heightened sense of loneliness when long distance VOIP-based conversations come to an end and Skype is switched off. They also are unable to set aside the impossibility of touch, and/or the lack of depth in WhatsApp-based conversations with family members. Further, a strong sense of nostalgia pervades their responses insofar as they report missing the physical presence of their family member, preferring face-to-face conversations above virtual interactions. For these individuals, stories and narratives lose their spontaneity, natural warmness, and closeness when they are mediated by technology.

They also point out that the process of having to build multiple narratives across different applications and platforms (i.e., extractive interactivity), entails a heighten level of effort that can be interrupted for any number of reasons which, in turn, risks rendering family narratives incomplete or otherwise unfinished. Equally problematic in their view is the diverse range of technical competencies and skills within families, with some individuals feeling overwhelmed by the fast pace of technological change. This, in turn, raises the possibility of in-family segregation with regard to awareness of ongoing familial stories.

In summary, the findings from this thesis suggest that technological mediation is altering familial storytelling insofar as digital communicative applications and platforms appear to be facilitating new modes of expression as well as catalyzing and supporting the creation of liminal spaces. Furthermore, digital family photos, text, emoticons, and the sense of experiencing body and space differently are apparently contributing to the creation of

transnational narratives. However, common narratives may elude those who do not have the necessary skills, time, or willingness to connect all digital stories.

### 6.2 Study Limitations

In conducting the research for this thesis, and as is to be expected, some limitations were encountered. The main issue relates to language. Collecting data in Spanish and presenting my findings in English involved a series of translation-related decisions that despite my best efforts may have impacted upon some of the interpretations advanced and the manner in which they were reported. I acted as the researcher and the translator. Interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed in Spanish. Therefore, my Colombian origin and my knowledge of Spanish and Latin American culture played a role in the quality of the translation of the material gathered during the interviews. I faced three major difficulties in translating the information gathered from the interviews: (i) obtaining pertinent contexts; (ii) comparing grammatical forms; and (iii) making the reports understandable.

First, every expression in any language carries "a set of assumptions, feelings, and values" (Birbili, 2000). These are emotional connotations that are difficult to track for an outsider, and extremely difficult to convey when translating from language to another. Put simply, every language has a character that cannot be copied. To this end, I struggled with conveying festive and casual tones in Spanish to English when translating participants' observations.

Second, Spanish grammatical forms differ from their English counterpart. As such, some of the sentences and phrasing expressed during the interviews are resistant to translation

because changing their syntactical style to adapt to the English structure causes a loss of meaning.

Third, the Spanish language interview transcripts were not translated word-by-word into English. This decision was based on the fact that my principal aim was to report experiences and perceptions. Engaging in word-by-word translation would reduce the readability of the text and prevent readers from understanding the real experience behind each word. This flexible translation did not save me from finding, for instance, particular words or expressions that, although entirely relevant to the study, only Colombians use and understand. It became evident during the analysis of data, that the natural flow of words is somehow compromised once they are translated into another language.

The second limitation pertains to the research design. Given the resource and time constraints with which I have had to contend, I was forced to rely foremost on information gathered through an interview-based format. Ideally, a study of this nature would be rooted in a multi-sited ethnographic design. The latter would have enabled me to transcend a reliance on reported observations from participants to observe first-hand the conversations and interactions these families maintain using digital communicative applications and platforms. Using formal ethnographic participant observation in more than one site with multiple families, the scope of the study would extend to explore patterns of ICT consumption, the use of new modes in chats and VoIP-based conversations, forms of embodiment during practices of storytelling, the circulation of photos and texts to track narratives, collective memories, and processes of remembering and forgetting within the practice of digital storytelling. This limitation was, however, somewhat offset by my having been

spontaneously granted access to observing one family's extended Skype conversation, and the WhatsApp chat logs of two other participant families.

### 6.3 Final Words and Future Directions

The results emerging from the interviews with the participant families point to a desire to overcome distance and stay together. It is possible that affectivity is what allows them to connect and communicate, create a sense of community, and finally, build a sense of belonging actualizing historical experiences, rebuilding collective memories, and recreating everyday moments. A further exploration of affectivity and fidelity as the glues maintaining communication and storytelling among transnational families would shed light on the ways in which families are mobilizing expressions and stories in order to create identities. In addition, future analysis of the notion of memory as an intricate fibre linking stories and narratives would likely broaden the understanding of the process of storytelling within transnational families.

It seems plausible that the micro levels of family interactions hold clues to understanding the new social meanings and interactions Colombians are building. Perhaps, considering how Colombians are creating new models of interaction, mobile identities, and self-narratives can contribute to resolving old issues that have impeded Colombian society deal effectively with conflict and war. Put simply, there is a possibility that intimate communicational processes offer clues to solving macro problems in the communicational realm that allow Colombian society to find new ways to talk, interact, understand each other, and build a common future.

Along with contemporary means of interacting transnationally, technological devices are brought home and embraced as part of the family dynamic. Digital communicative applications and platforms, along with other ICTs, are easing daily communication with families. As shown by the findings of this thesis, something quite interesting is happening regarding presence as a technological affordance. Watching family members hug each other through the screen; witnessing sons taking care of their parents during sickness; seeing children growing up next to their grandparents although being miles away might be indications that something is happening with the space (that is apparently expanding), with the body (that seems to become mobile), and with narratives (that are seemingly multimodal). In fact, digital photos or videos, chat texts, and live interactions via VoIP platforms can give a glimpse of how transnational coexistence among transnational families is carrying out. Questions about embodiment, the sense of traveling through spaces, and the construction of lived and representational spaces can be possible themes for future studies.

In sum, when it comes to storytelling, there is still much to discuss. Narratives are not merely a bunch of stories, and storytelling is not the mere act of telling tales. They are portals to understanding how families are building sociabilities and subjectivities. It is through narratives and the practice of storytelling that subjects build themselves in relation to the possibility of meeting the one that close to their heart. It is also through narratives and storytelling that families are able to account their experiences and transform their lives.

## Appendix A. Open Call

ENGLISH VERSION
OPEN CALL
COLOMBIAN FAMILIES LIVING IN MONTREAL
Catalina Arango, master student of the University of Ottawa, is conducting the study "Digital Storytelling: Transnational Families and ICTs".
The study seeks to understand how ICTs informs or constrain our way of telling stories within our families. In order to address this question, the study will explore how six Colombian families with members residing in Montreal and Colombia create practices of digital storytelling while communicating using different platforms on the Internet. The study seeks to advance our understanding of the lived experience of migrant families in mobile societies and transnational communities.
Would you and other member of your family (living under your same roof) in Montreal be willing to participate in this study? In order to do so, you need to be able to respond with a 'yes' to these two questions:

* Does your family in Montreal maintain at least bi-monthly conversations with relatives back in Colombia using the Internet (via blogs, VoIP platforms, texting apps, or social media)?
* Are you willing to invite one of your relatives in Colombia to participate in the study as well?

In addition, you and other member of your family need to be able to respond with a 'yes' to at least two of these questions:
* Do you consume both Colombian and Canadian media?
* Do you retain working/academic ties with Colombia while living in Canada?
* Do you keep connected to friends and colleges in Colombia?
* Do you maintain Colombian cultural habits (e.g. food, music, literature) while incorporating new ones based on the new experiences in Canada?
* Do you frequently feel "here and there"?
If you and other member of your family agree to be part of this study, you will be invited to take part in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The interviews will be of 45 to 60 minutes in duration. A third member of your family, based in Colombia, will also participate in a similar interview via Skype. Your participation would be entirely voluntary. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants. Confidentiality of your data is assured.
If you definitively want to participate and help one of your compatriots with her academic endeavors, please send an email to Catalina Arango at: caran013@uottawa.ca
Thank you for considering this request.

SPANISH VERSION
INVITACION
FAMILIAS COLOMBIANAS EN MONTREAL

Catalina Arango, estudiante de Maestría de la Universidad de Ottawa, está liderando la investigación "Digital Storytelling: Transnational Families and ICTs".
El estudio busca entender cómo las tecnologías de información y comunicación facilitan o restringen la manera de contar nuestras historias familiares. Específicamente, el estudio explorará cómo seis familias colombianas con miembros en Montreal y Colombia crean dinámicas de narración digital mientras se comunican usando diferentes plataformas de Internet. El estudio nos ayudará a entender las experiencias vividas como inmigrantes en medio de sociedades móbiles y comunidades transnacionales.

Estarías tú y otro miembro de tu familia (que viva bajo el mismo techo en Montreal) dispuestos a participar en este estudio? Para eso, ambos deberán contestar SI a estas dos preguntas:
* Tu familia en Montreal mantiene una comunicación frecuente, al menos dos veces por mes, con los familiares que están en Colombia usando Internet (blogs, VoIP, aplicaciones de texto, o redes sociales)?
* Estarías dispuesto a invitar a uno de esos familiares que vive en Colombia a participar en este estudio?

Adicionalmente, tú y el otro miembro de tu familia en Montreal deberán contestar SI al menos a DOS de las siguientes preguntas:
* Ves, lees o escuchas medios colombianos y canadienses?
* Mantienes contactos académicos o laborales con Colombia?
* Sigues en contacto con amigos o colegas en Colombia?
* Continuas teniendo hábitos culturales que te ligan con Colombia (por ejemplo, comida o literatura) mientras incorporas nuevos hábitos basados en tus nuevas experiencias en Canadá?
* Con frecuencia te sientes "aquí y allá"?

Si tú y tu otro miembro de tu familia en Montreal están deacuerdo en hacer parte de este estudio, participarán en una entrevista cara a cara de 45-60 minutos de duración. Un tercer miembro de tu familia, que viva en Colombia, también será invitado a participar en una entrevista similar via Skype.
Tu participación será completamente voluntaria. Se usarán pseudónimos para identificar a todos los participantes y se garantizará la confidencialidad de toda la información suministrada.
Si definitivamente quieres participar y ayudar a uno de tus compatriotas, envía por favor un email a Catalina Arango a caran013@uottawa.ca
Gracias por tu interés!

## Appendix B. Questionnaire

### PART 1

Please answer the following questions by ticking the boxes, and/or writing in the spaces provided. Instructions are provided in italics for each question.

**1. How frequently does your family communicate?**

| | |
|---|---|
| Daily | |
| Several times during the week | |
| Weekly | |
| A couple of times in the month | |

**2. What kind of platforms does your family use to communicate?** *(Please rank your choices in order of importance by putting a **1**, **2**, **3…** in the corresponding spaces)*

| | |
|---|---|
| VoIP (Skype, Facetime, others) | |
| Online chats (i.e. Whatsapp) | |
| Email | |
| Social Networks (Twitter, Facebook) | |
| Blogs | |
| Online phone | |
| Traditional phone | |

**3. Do your family use only one particular platform or multiple platforms at the same time?**

A single platform _____

Multiple platforms _____

**3. Taking into account your experiences <u>before and after</u> your process of immigration, what does your family share (IN GENERAL)?** *(Please rank your choices in order of importance by putting a **1**, **2**, **3…** in the corresponding spaces)*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Recipes | | Tales | |
| Songs or music | | Gossips | |
| Photos | | Prayers | |
| Videos | | Games | |
| Anecdotes related to sports | | Jokes | |
| Anecdotes related to politics | | News about relatives | |
| News about acquaintances | | Recent updates | |
| News about the kids | | | |

*For this study, recipes, music or songs, photos, videos, anecdotes, gossips, tales, jokes, prays, or games are consider STORIES.*

**PART 2**

| TRANSNATIONAL NATURE OF FAMILIES |
|---|
| 1. Do you consume both Colombian and Canadian media?<br>2. Do you retain working/academic ties with Colombia while living in Canada?<br>3. Do you keep connected to friends and colleges in Colombia?<br>4. Do you maintain Colombian cultural habits (e.g. food, music, literature) while incorporating new ones based on the new experiences in Canada?<br>5. Do you frequently feel "here and there"? |
| FAMILY COMMUNICATION BEFORE MIGRATION |
| 6. What kind of stories did your family share while everyone was living in Colombia? |
| 7. When everybody was in Colombia, when were those stories told, in what situations? |
| 8. Does everyone participate in telling those stories? |
| FAMILY COMMUNICATION AFTER MIGRATION |
| 9. What kind of stories does your family share now? |
| 5. Now, when are those stories told, in what situations? |
| 8. Now, how is the dynamic of storytelling? Does everyone participate? |
| 9. What is the role of technology in telling those stories? |
| THE NATURE OF STORIES |
| 10. How were those stories told? (In Colombia) |
| 11. Now, in addition to those practices you guys used before, does your family incorporate pre designed images, videos, memes, music, blogs in order to tell stories? |
| 12. Does your family create your own images, videos, memes, music, blogs, texts, in order to tell stories? |
| 13. Are they any other way does your family use to tell stories? |

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