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## Sequential Graphics, Ethnographic Insights<sup>1</sup>

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*Sequenzielle Grafik und ethnografische Einsichten*

*Abstract:* Dieser Beitrag verortet sich an der Schnittstelle von Narratologie, ethnografischer Praxis und ethnografischem Erzählen mittels comics-basierter „sequenzieller Grafik“. Er zeigt, wie sich die Nuanciertheit und Komplexität ethnografischer Einsichten durch eine vertiefte Auseinandersetzung mit grundlegenden narratologischen Kategorien wie Zeit, narrativer Welterzeugung und Fokalisierung erschließen lassen. Als zentrales Beispiel dient der autoethnografische Comic „The Duck Pond 鸭母屈“ der Anthropologin und Künstlerin Emily Thiessen. Die genannten Konzepte werden jeweils kurz eingeführt und anschließend anhand von Thiessens Arbeit veranschaulicht. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt dabei den medienspezifischen Affordanzen, die die sequenzielle Grafik im Hinblick auf narrative Elemente bietet. Abschließend wird argumentiert, dass der bewusste Einsatz dieser formalen Mittel die Nuancierung, Komplexität und Zugänglichkeit ethnografischen Erzählens erhöht. Dadurch erweitert sich nicht nur die Art und Weise, wie Forschung kommuniziert wird, sondern auch, wie ethnografische Daten interpretiert werden können – sowohl in sequenzieller Grafik als auch in rein textbasierten ethnografischen Narrativen.

*Keywords:* sequenzielle Grafik, Narratologie, storyworld, Fokalisierung, grafische Anthropologie

### **Ethnographic insight, narratology, and comics**

The nexus of ethnographic insight, narratology, and research about comics presents an exciting area of common overlap that warrants closer attention. If pictured as a Venn diagram, with each area of inquiry occupying one circular region, I typically stand in the “ethnographic insights” circle – as a social and cultural anthropologist working with ethnographic methods and writing styles to produce and communicate ethnographic insights. In my current research, my toes reach over the edge into the “narratology” circle. At the intersections of these two areas, I conduct narrative interviews with research participants and use narrative analyses of their stories to bet-

1 I want to extend gracious words of gratitude to my two peer reviewers and editor Anne Dippel for their helpful and considerate commentaries which contributed to the article in this form.

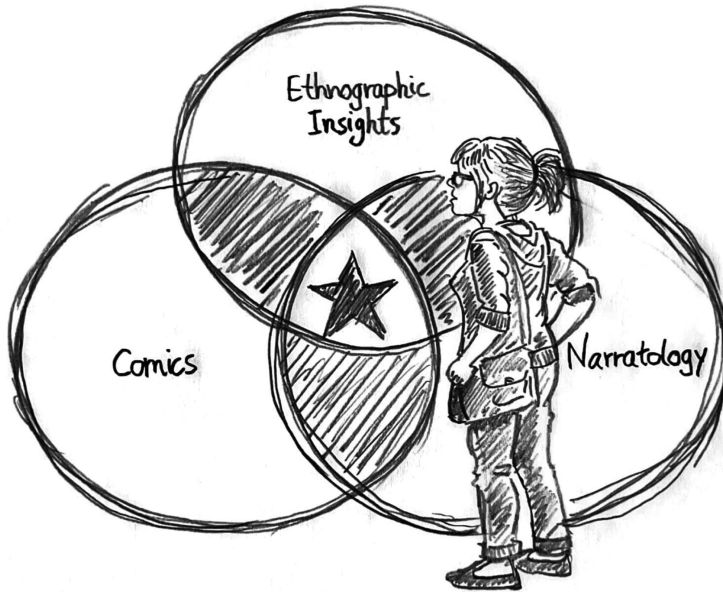


Fig. 1: Sketch by the author

ter understand a wider cultural phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> For this paper, however, I am standing in the “narratology” field and looking towards the central intersection and back at “ethnographic insights”. This act of interdisciplinary reflection and cross-discipline knowledge transfer builds upon disciplinary histories, as described below, but also provides a perhaps less obvious and discipline-distant vocabulary to describe what I see in emerging graphic representations of ethnographic research results. From this position, I question if the conscious and deliberate use of formal narratological concepts – here I only address time, narrative world-building, and focalization – can contribute to enhancing nuance and complexity in the communication of ethnographic insights. I use an ethnographic sequential graphic, a concept I define below, to interrogate concretely how these narratological concepts can be operationalized and what comic-specific medium affordances (Kuttner et al. 2021) offer in the act of communication. What constitutes this type of affordance and examples of how they can be used in the communication of ethnographic insights are illustrated in the

2 Although the specific topic of my research is not essential for this paper, it concerns representations of and interactions with Indigenous North Americans in Germany in a phenomenon referred to as German Indianthusiasm. It builds off my master’s thesis, see Thompson 2019.

examples. Sequential graphics lend themselves well to visually reveal these narratological concepts ‘in action’, but they can equally be applied to text-only ethnographic narratives, most easily in ethnographic vignettes, but also in other narrative forms.

To approach this research question, I have structured the paper in the following manner: First I lay a foundation within this interdisciplinary nexus. I acknowledge the rich and diverse histories of the intersections of ethnography and narrative, narrative study and comics, and comics and ethnography. Next, I provide a brief introduction to the above-mentioned three narrative principles. Afterwards, I introduce the storyline of Emily Thiessen’s ethnographic sequential graphic “The Duck Pond 鸭母屈”<sup>3</sup> and use select panels to show how the narrative principles described are visible within the comic, the sequential graphic. “The Duck Pond 鸭母屈” is a link between the theoretical nature of the narratological concepts and the practical art of translating ethnographic data into narrative storytelling. I finish by discussing some advantages of sequential graphics for the dissemination of ethnographic insights.

### **Positioning at an interdisciplinary nexus**

At this trisection, I first acknowledge prominent currents and particular influences out of which my research question grows. This is not an attempt to provide an exhaustive literature review into all three intersecting fields, which would extend the capacities of this paper. Rather, I provide a general contextualization of past interactions, inspiring works at these junctures, and selected pieces of current research concerning ethnography/narratology/comics and graphic representations in cultural studies to provide a general foundation and (inter-)disciplinary ordering for my contribution.

First and foremost, my feet can be planted in the ‘narratological circle’ due to my involvement in the research school ‘Factual and Fictional Narration’<sup>4</sup> and its theoretical, analytical, and methodological points of departure in narratology, referring to both *Narratologie* and *Erzählforschung*. This literature studies and philological-based scientific study of narrative introduced me to so-called classical schools of Gérard Genette (1993) and Franz K. Stanzel (1982), who concerned themselves with typological models of narrative instances while detailing formal and structuring narrative components. These influences are clear in my choice of the narrative principles I have selected to discuss in this article. In addition, narratologist, literature critic, and film scholar Seymour Chatman’s seminal work *Story and Discourse – Narrative Struc-*

3 The comic is available through the artists’ website: <https://emilythiessen.ca/project/the-duck-pond/>, accessed April 1, 2025.

4 *Graduiertenkolleg 1767*, funded by the German Research Council, project number 190376163, located in Freiburg, Germany, from 2012–2021, led by Professor Monika Fludernik. I was a research group member from 2018–2021.

*ture in Fiction and Film* (1978) shaped my selection and theoretical underpinnings particularly relating to narrative selection, coherence, and sequentiality. His already transdisciplinary work lends itself well to be repurposed at the intersection of cultural studies and narratology.

As an anthropologist, however, my interests in graduate school necessarily led me to so-called postclassical theories of narrative and the intersections between functionalist or structuralist narratology and (linguistic) anthropology. Here, I am inspired by the work of Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (2001), Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007), Anna De Fina (2003), Hagar Salamon and Regina Bendix (2020), Monika Fludernik (1996), Mieke Bal (2009), and more generally the publications of *Fabula - Journal of Folktale Studies*<sup>5</sup>. Together, they complicate narrow definitions of narrative, while interrogating narratives 'in the wild'. These scholars use their field work and interview data to theorize narrative transmission, tellability, messy less-than-structured narrative or storytelling forms, methodological challenges, and the everyday-ness of narratives, among many other contributions to current and emergent narrative theory. Their pivotal contributions have enabled cultural theorists and anthropologists to utilize but also re-imagine how narratives can be defined, studied, and theorized. Complementing these scholars, I look to Ansgar and Vera Nünning (Eds., 2002), Silke Meyer (2020), and Franziska Schößler (2006) to find disciplinary footing at the intersection of narrative and cultural theories. While these scholars play less explicit roles in this paper, together they implicitly provide the foundation for my research question. Without them, I would not have been able to pose the question in the first place or situate my terminological divergences.

The connection to comics was originally inspired by a 2021 Royal Anthropological Institute roundtable discussion I had the pleasure of listening to called 'Crisis Through Comics: A Roundtable Discussion on Graphic Anthropology', convened by Letizia Bonanno and José Sherwood González. Graphic anthropology, the conveners described, was a loose term used to include anthropological work which included illustration in the collection of data, analysis of that data, or the representation thereof. According to this understanding, comics but also other forms of graphic representations which depict and contribute to ethnographic insights like photographs,

5 <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/journal/key/fabl/html>, accessed January 6, 2026. I would also like to acknowledge a much longer history between folklore studies and a categorical and typology-focused narratology. The impressive, even monumental, *Enzyklopädie des Märchens (Encyclopaedia of the Folktale)* is perhaps the longest running research project on popular storytelling, located at the intersection of classical narratology and anthropology. Thank you to Anne Dippel, who brought this oversight to my attention; see <https://adw-goe.de/en/enzmaer/>, accessed January 6, 2026.

maps, kinship charts, etc. are aspects of 'Graphic Anthropology'.<sup>6</sup> The contributing anthropologists to this roundtable discussed "the potential of graphic anthropology as a medium to generate political critique and create new venues for public engagement" as described by graphic anthropologist Charlie Rumsby.<sup>7</sup> The roundtable and the online visual anthropological exhibition "Illustrating Anthropology", curated by Laura Haapio-Kirk and Jennifer Cearnsto, to which many of the speakers had contributed, challenged me to reconsider how ethnographic insights could be presented. I was particularly drawn to the work of Charlie Rumsby, Shawn Forde, Anna Passlick, Gemma Sou, Lucy Hunt, Daniel Locke, Marcello Francioni, Chris Schimkowsky, Kaitlin Banfill, and Emily Thiessen (among others), who all incorporated sequentiality into their illustrations.<sup>8</sup>

I use the term *Sequential Graphics* in this paper to specifically mark this special kind of illustrated anthropological effort at communicating ethnographic insights. As an umbrella term, I use it to encompass graphic novels, comic strips, comics ethnographies (Fuggle/Walker 2025), or other forms of experimental visual narration based on ethnographic research. With these features, that is, a concrete link to ethnographic methods and research processes with the goal of communicating the results thereof in narrative form, I emphasize that sequential graphics have a claim to factuality, or a claim to representing the lived world. This could, for example, also be achieved through fictionalized characters to maintain anonymity – *Lissa: A Story About Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution* (2017) by Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye, illustrated by Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer, would be a fitting example.<sup>9</sup>

With these conditions, I set the term apart from the more common designation 'sequential art' used in comic studies but also by some visual anthropologists,<sup>10</sup> while retaining an obvious etymological connection. American cartoonist Will Eisner first coined 'sequential art' in the foundational textbook *Comics and Sequential Art* in

6 Theodossopoulos and Bonanno, participant and convener at the roundtable respectively, have published a seminal article on graphic anthropology tracing differing categorical developments and terminological particularities in this emerging "subfield of transformative practice" (2025: 2).

7 <https://www.charlierumsby.com/post/updates-illustrating-anthropology-learning-pack-the-launch-of-a-graphic-anthropology-community>, accessed January 1, 2026.

8 <https://illustratinganthropologycom.wordpress.com/>, accessed April 1, 2025.

9 *Lissa* was the first publication in the University of Toronto Press' "groundbreaking" series called ethnoGRAPHIC <https://www.utppublishing.com/series/ethnographic>, accessed January 1, 2026.

10 As one example, Andrew Gilbert graciously shares his planning of a seminar on the intersections of visual anthropology and graphic novels/sequential art at <https://www.utpteachingculture.com/teaching-anthropology-through-sequential-art-part-i/>, accessed January 2, 2026. See also Theodossopoulos and Bonanno (2025), which outlines this disciplinary interplay of visual and graphic anthropology, speaking also to the important tension between the textual and the visual more generally.

1985. Like sequential graphics, he uses it to refer to a special type of visual storytelling “language” in which “illustration and prose” are read and interpreted concurrently (Eisner 1985: 7–8).<sup>11</sup> Eisner’s textbook, along with prominent successors like Scott McCloud’s frequently quoted *Understanding Comics* (1994), are undeniably valuable, genre-specific works for explaining the process of creating and comprehending the structures of sequential art. Yet graphic anthropology experts Dimitrios Theodossopoulos and Letizia Bonanno eloquently argue that the books’ focus on comic medium-specific affordances is at the expense of “meaning, situatedness, and culture”, aspects which are “vital to anthropologists” (2025: 5). It is productive, therefore, to distance from Eisner’s terminology and pedagogical emphasis here for the purposes of theoretically addressing the specificities of ethnographic ‘comics’. *Sequential graphics*, as I denote them, would align with Theodossopoulos and Bonanno’s ‘sequential’ over ‘unrestrained’ category of works of graphic anthropological production, without the reiterative tongue-twisters of “sequential graphic ethnographic monograph” or “sequential [...] graphic anthropological output” (2025: 6). My focus in this contribution on sequential graphics, and not for example on Theodossopoulos and Bonanno’s productive category of “unrestrained graphic anthropological outputs” (2025: 6), allows me to narrow the broad field of graphic anthropology and apply, almost seamlessly, (comic) narratological elements.<sup>12</sup>

### **Why a structural, but postclassical narratological stance?**

I have intentionally chosen an unconventional definition and perhaps even a different ontological understanding of *narrative* for an audience engaged in cultural analysis.

I have done so firstly because I am encouraged by visual anthropologist Mark R. Westmoreland, author of “Graphic Anthropology: A Foundation for Multimodality”, as he writes that “in order for anthropologists to effectively engage this modality”, referring to the creative medium of comics for representing their works, “it is imperative to provide some guidelines” (2021: 78). While Westmoreland goes on to suggest these guidelines pertain to how one can learn to use and interpret the visual structures or optimize text with illustration (both important factors), I argue that we must begin first with an understanding of what a narrative is, is not, or can be. Formal aspects thereof assist in that venture. Eisner asserts that “conceiving the idea and the story”, that is the “order of telling. . . the dialogue or narrative elements”, are the first

11 Theodossopoulos and Bonanno contrast this action with the ‘watching’ of film or the ‘seeing’ of fine art (2025: 5).

12 For a more in-depth overview of comic-specific narratological theorizing, see Packard et al. 2019, specifically Chapter 4, ‘Narratological Comic Analysis’ [*Narratologische Comicanalyse*] (Packard 2019).

steps in producing sequential art (1985: 122) – and for this, a concise narratological definition of what the (narrative) idea or story is proves to be helpful.

Secondly, the definition I have chosen outlines specific building blocks or essential features – necessary narrative elements which must be fulfilled for a ‘narrative’. These necessarily put limits on what is deemed a narrative or not, yes, but these essential elements also provide opportunities for reflection. When considering nuance and complexity of sequential graphics, such a definition aids in analysing if ‘all’ aspects have been addressed. If, perhaps, there is a lack in complexity, or the ethnographic insights are not coming across as nuanced, the narrative elements contained in this definition could potentially help in identifying why.

Within the broad field of narratology, there are numerous terminological debates, specificities, and, at times, complications. These are particularly visible across different languages, schools of thought, and colloquial uses.<sup>13</sup> These debates fuel new insights, but from my experiences in graduate school and beyond, they can make it difficult to agree on the boundaries of what exactly is being analysed, its functions, and its academic value. While acknowledging that I am picking just one of many definitions, I have done so to bring value to the discussion of comic narratology in cultural studies while ensuring the definition remains open enough to account for differing fields of inquiry. Thus, the third reason for choosing this specific definition is to highlight disciplinary tensions and even ontological irritations between cultural studies [*Empirische Kulturwissenschaft*] or cultural anthropological understandings of the term compared to a narratological characterisation.

What is referred to as a narrative in the definition I use here, for example, would be closer to Silke Meyer’s *Erzählung* or story, whereas her *Narrativ* [narrative], she writes, refers to “meta-narratives or master narratives that place individual stories [*Erzählungen*] in a larger context, thus making them collectively effective” (my translation, 2020: 325).<sup>14</sup> Narratives, she explains from a cultural studies perspective, drawing on Sebastian Dümling’s work (2020), are fundamental stabilizing schemas which link the individual and their narratives to larger-scale cultural meanings. This delineation of story and narrative (*Erzählung/Narrativ*) are indeed far more productive for my own work more generally but do not account for the specific narrative elements I am looking to describe in this article. Philosophical anthropologist Norbert Meuter, who works at the intersections of cultural philosophy and narrativity, accurately describes this tension:

13 See Norbert Meuter’s discussion of narration in various disciplines at <https://www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/49.html>, accessed April 1, 2025.

14 For an English-language resource, literary scholar Albrecht Koschorke echoes this sentiment: <https://www.campus.uni-konstanz.de/en/science-backstage-1/studying-narratives-in-order-to-understand-society>, accessed January 2, 2026.

“In the field of literature, narrative objects are fully formed from the outset (at least if one excludes interpretation and historical contextualization from the concept of the literary text), whereas the historical disciplines need to construct these objects, if not completely, then at least to a large extent” (2013: para. 1)

– and here, I argue, disciplines relating to the studies of culture too. The narratives – in the literary sense – contained within already produced sequential graphics are fully formed, notwithstanding extratextual discussions, as Meuter notes. Thus, the following narratological definition can be more productive in this case.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, the chosen definition allows for productive analytical constructive alignment: I am questioning if the deliberate use of formal narratological concepts aid in the visual communication of ethnographic insights, and for that I should maintain a narratologically grounded understanding of narrative. As described above, for this study I am looking from a narratology-informed perspective onto the intersections of ethnographic insights, comics, and narratology.

### Defining narrative

Postclassical narratologist Monika Fludernik defines narrative as follows:

“A narrative [...] is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot-structure).” (Fludernik 2009: 6)

In addition, and of interest to my argument concerning the second narrative element I discuss (narrative world-making), she notes that “it is the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonist” (Fludernik 2009: 6). I address this point again near the end of the paper.

Fludernik’s definition works in tandem with the notion that narratives are comprised of (at least) two levels. To limit the narratological jargon and terminological

15 The term ‘story’, Meyer’s *Erzählung*, is not easily adopted in lieu of the English ‘narrative’ due to the terminological confusion with Chatman’s narrative levels of *story* and *narrative discourse*, which I describe below, and colloquial use of the term *story* more generally; see also H. Porter Abbott 2002: 12–18 for a nuanced discussion of these terminological difficulties including reference to key terms in other languages to describe narrative components. Research on so-called ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou 2015) further complicates the translation of *Erzählung* in this capacity into merely ‘story’ in English. There are, however, ontological compatibilities which may be of value to (linguistic) anthropologists working at the trisection of narrative analysis, identity formation, and sociolinguistics who are looking for English-language near-equivalents to Meyer’s *Erzählung*, in addition to a departure from Labovian narrative analysis.

confusion (see footnote 15), I will often come back to what Chatman calls “the what” of the narrative – that is the components of the *story*; its events, characters, settings, and “the way” it is told, which he calls the *discourse*<sup>16</sup> (1978: 9).

The complexity of these three narratological concepts – time, narrative world-making, and focalization – should not be underestimated. Here, I only present a reduced introduction to them, highlighting specific aspects that I find beneficial for the presentation of ethnographic research results as sequential graphics. After introducing the narratological elements, I discuss them in relation to the sequential graphic example, before ending with concluding remarks.

### 1. Time: Leveraging sequencing to frame and shape the story

To discuss narrative in relation to temporality and temporal ordering is to jump into the deep end of the narratology pool: There is no doubt it is one of the most studied areas in narrative theory. Here, I very broadly touch on three intertwining components of time in a narrative with the help of the two levels of narrative described above.<sup>17</sup>

First, there is a temporal relationship *between* the story and narrative discourse levels – the ‘what’ and the ‘way’ of a narrative respectively. Writing, telling, sharing or recounting a story necessitates reduction in the selection of events and level of detail. This inevitably leads to a discrepancy between the time it takes to tell a story (*Erzählzeit*, narrating time) and the temporal length which is represented through the plot (*Erzählte Zeit*, story time) (Müller 1968). When the narrating time is shorter than the story time, the narrative is sped up, it is summarized. Contrarily, when the narrating time is longer than the story time, the narrative is slowed down, it is stretched. In addition to this contribution on narrative duration, literary theorist Gérard Genette also considers the importance of narrative frequency and temporal ordering (1993: 58–65). Frequency relates to the relationship between the number of events and how often they are narrated. This can increase or decrease an events’ ‘eventfulness’: Is one event talked about many times (repetitive) or are multiple events narrated once (iterative)? Temporal ordering (chronology) refers to the arrangement of those events; they can be assembled in a linear or non-chrono-

16 Discourse here does not refer to the Foucauldian understanding of discourse as systems of language or practices that shape one’s understanding of the world, social structures, or knowledge more generally. It is used specifically in the sense of narrative discourse as one component of narrative, alongside with story. Abbott summarizes: “**story** is an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*), and **narrative discourse** is those events as represented” (emphasis in original, Chatman 2002: 16).

17 This section draws on the structure of Fludernik’s contribution ‘Time in Narrative’ in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory* (2008).

logical scheme which may include flashforwards (prolepsis) or flashbacks (analepsis) (Genette 1993).

Second, the grammatical or morphological possibilities influence how the story is told. Most obviously, this is seen in the narrative's primary grammatical tense, but also in decisions to change tenses within the narrative. And third, there is an important philosophical consideration of time perception more generally. Guided by Paul Ricoeur, one can philosophize whether time is objective, linear, and of the cosmos (drawing on Aristotle), or a subjective and uniquely human experience (drawing on Augustine).<sup>18</sup> These philosophical considerations can influence the nature of narratives in their structure and temporal ordering, but they also lead to larger questions. Are narratives created to provide order (subjective experience) or are they, in a way, pre-written and lived out in an already ordered time (of the cosmos)? Ricoeur (1984) proposes, among other thoughts, that narrative humanizes time, allowing readers to make sense of temporal experiences and reflect on the meaning of time.<sup>19</sup> In that vein, connections and juxtapositions to the notion that time is culturally constructed can be explored.<sup>20</sup>

## **2. Narrative world-making: Detailing the research field through an understanding of the storyworld**

Narrative world-making refers to the process authors engage in to create a coherent, referentially rich environment for the story. This process results in a storyworld: a mental representation of a cohesive universe which is built through narrative elements. It is the immersive space in which a story can unfold (A. Nünning 2010).<sup>21</sup> This world comes to life through textual, visual, and even sensory elements; in descriptions of physical components like landscapes, scenery, objects, characters, and more abstract considerations like cultural practices, social hierarchies, or even through affect and ambiance (Ryan/Thon 2014b). Marie-Laure Ryan explains that

18 I found William C. Dowling's work (2011) helpful in disentangling Ricoeur's original *Temps et récit*.

19 In particular, the 'Preface' and 'Part I: The Circle of Narrative and Temporality'.

20 Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov's contribution on time from an anthropological perspective in the Open Encyclopaedia of Anthropology at <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/time> is particularly insightful, accessed January 7, 2026.

21 The term storyworld is sometimes used interchangeably with *narrated world*, *diegesis*, or *fictional world*, though from a narratological perspective, these terms are all nuanced. For simplicity and coherence in my argument I will speak mostly of storyworlds, though I believe a deeper dive into diegetic levels – the multiple spatiotemporal universes in which the story and differing acts of narration takes place – could be especially useful for ethnographic insights displayed in sequential graphics. *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* <https://www.jstor.org/journal/storyworlds>, accessed January 2, 2026, provides an in-depth, trans-disciplinary, and intermedial collection of current research on the topic of storyworlds.

“a storyworld is more than a static container for objects mentioned in a story; it is a dynamic model of evolving situations, and its representation in the recipient’s mind is a simulation of the changes that are caused by the events of the plot” (2014: 33). A leading scholar in this area, David Herman, succinctly adds: “Storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narratives, and narratives can be defined in turn as blueprints for world-creation” (2009: vii).

One could argue that cultural theorists and those working with anthropological methods already engage in deep reflections and analytical contestations with their field sites and the representations thereof – with a glance into any book on ethnographic methods or writing, this will be discussed in detail. In terms of sequential graphics, however, considering field sites as storyworlds can be another productive level of reflection. Westmoreland, writing on the topic of graphic anthropology, more generally states: “In contrast to written prose, comics can leave small visual clues that don’t distract the reader yet give them a sense of being in the scene” (2021: 78). The concept of the storyworld allows for reflection, therefore, not only about field sites but also the interactions between the representations of those sites (in word and text) in addition to their roles in narrative formation and thus the narrative’s role in constituting the setting.

Comic-specific visual affordances used in sequential graphics and a reader’s capability to decode them with relative ease allow for movement between a main, consistent storyworld and “ontologically distinct sub-worlds” like those in dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, or memories (Packard 2019: 81). The ability to use both a main storyworld and sub-worlds helps to organize what is happening to the person telling the story or the main character(s) and what is happening among or to other people (Ryan/Thon 2014a). In complex narratives, moving ‘between worlds’ allows for the integration of multiple perspectives through the depiction of others’ memories, dreams, inner thoughts, and so forth if in accordance with other narrative elements (see below). Switching between the main storyworld and sub-worlds can be achieved with the help of comic-specific affordances like colour blocking or visual indicators (thought bubbles) of other states like remembering or dreaming.

### **3. Focalization: Harnessing the power of perspective, voice, and subjectivity<sup>22</sup>**

Focalization refers to the lens through which the story is told, it is “the position or quality of consciousness through which we ‘see’ events in the narrative” (Abbott 2002: 190). Colloquially, one might say it is the ‘point of view’ from which the story is told, but it is more than just that, and I argue that understanding the nuances of this

22 I am grateful to one of the reviewers who suggested I forefront this narratological concept.

narratological concept could be helpful when seeking to increase complexity, particularly relating to voice and subjectivities, in ethnographic narrative storytelling.

Focalization affects how a story is told in three important ways.<sup>23</sup> First, it provides a possible vantage point from a certain perspective: from a narrator, a character within the story, or a neutral, omniscient standpoint. This vantage point locates the focalizer, that is the perspective from the person or narrator who tells the story, within the story (internally, in the same diegetic level) or outside of it (externally, extradiegetic level). Secondly, whether the focalizer is internally or externally positioned allows for varying degrees of embodiment, namely how subjectively or impersonally a character's point of view can be expressed. In the same line of thought, the third aspect is that the type of focalization also determines how the subjectivity of others, including their complex psychological states, feelings, dreams, and so forth, can be articulated. An external focalizer, for example, has access to those complex states but is themselves 'impersonal', as they do not tell about their own inner world. A singular reflector figure, on the other hand, does not have access to others' inner worlds but is 'embodied' in that the perspective originates from their own brain, and they are able to describe their own thoughts and reflect on their own actions. Speaking generally of Gérard Genette and Meike Bal's model of focalization, Monika Fludernik succinctly writes: "A basic premise of their model is a distinction between *perspective* [...] ('Who sees?') and *voice* ('Who speaks?')" (emphasis in original, 2009: 37–38).<sup>24</sup> The concept of focalization and how it relates to who is seeing (what can be subjectively described and by whom) and who is speaking (with distinct narrator position or narration styles) can be strategically applied in sequential graphics to communicate precise ethnographic insights. In adopting a more external position, the communicated narratives can also be strategically and intentionally formulated to leave more space for interpretation.

The task of adequately and respectfully representing others – an ongoing occupation in ethnographic narratives – can be aided by understanding these narratological nuances of focalization. It allows for reflection on the position of the focalizer and the benefits of internal or external or mixed vantage points. It provides a theoretical foundation to weigh the advantages of providing a first-person account, but with an understanding that the direct and unmediated inner worlds of others will be inacces-

23 This paragraph draws on Fludernik (2009: 36–39) which simplifies the terminology and nuances of wider discourses on focalization, perspective, point of view, and narration, drawing on several other narratologists. I reduce the complexity even further to provide a broad introduction to this concept. For a more differentiated introduction, see *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization* by Hühn et al. (2009); Richardson's contribution in that work on we-narratives could provide interesting impulses for collaborative and experimental ethnographic works.

24 She also includes *mode*, which I do not address in this paper.

sible (and the analytical tools available for implementation or review, see for example Fludernik 2009; Hühn et al. 2009). Seeing the focalizer, the narrator, and ‘characters’ (each with their own subjectivities) as distinct roles can allow for a more nuanced application of perspective and voice in ethnographic narratives generally. With the help of medium-specific affordances in sequential graphics, however, multiple diegetic levels or sub-worlds can provide new possibilities and focalizer-flexibility, which I will demonstrate with the help of the example below.

### Example: “The Duck Pond 鸭母屈” by Emily Thiessen

Choosing just one example proved to be very difficult – it could have been Laura Haapio-Kirk, Andrew Gilbert, Nick Sousanis, any one of the artists from the Illustrating Anthropology exhibit listed above, or the authors and illustrators from the University of Toronto Press ethnoGRAPHIC series, among many others. I selected “The Duck Pond 鸭母屈” by Emily Thiessen, however, for a few reasons: First, the complete sequential graphic is available online and accessible;<sup>25</sup> secondly, the work demonstrates the narratological principles I am discussing clearly, and lastly, she has published a reflection piece on the process behind the work which adds additional extratextual context and methodological insights, which were helpful in my analysis but are also potentially valuable for readers of this contribution (see Thiessen 2019).

Emily Thiessen is a Canadian artist and at the time of creating “The Duck Pond 鸭母屈”, she was studying anthropology. She describes herself as coming from “two lines of restless settlers: Hokkien Chinese-Malaysians, and Mennonites who immi-

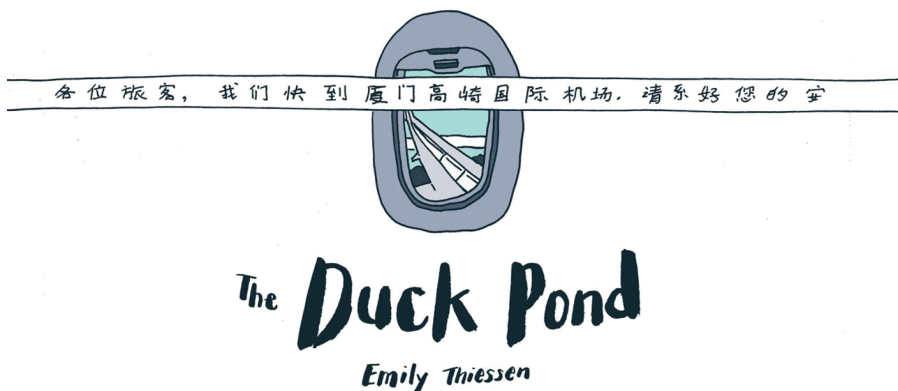


Fig. 2: Title and beginning of Thiessen’s sequential graphic

25 <https://emilythiessen.ca/project/the-duck-pond/>, accessed 01.04.2025. All images from the sequential graphic are obtained from this site.

grated to Treaty 1<sup>26</sup> territory”.<sup>27</sup> In 2017, she took a break from her studies to improve her Mandarin language skills and to locate her grandfather’s birth village near Xiamen, China. “The Duck Pond 鴨母屈” is an auto-ethnographic narrative, a sequential graphic in 77 panels which captures the story of that search.

The narrative begins with Thiessen on a flight from Singapore to Xiamen Gaoji International airport. She then pictorially describes how her great grandparents made the trip in the other direction around 100 years prior. At that time, she explains, many people including her family left China because of persecution or for opportunities abroad. Thiessen’s mother and third uncle Saku are introduced as she begins to share more details about her own family’s migration story, including a special duck pond in her grandfather’s ancestral village. The narrative then returns to Thiessen’s search for the village. She continues to describe her experience in Xiamen and shows how she makes her way to a village and ancestral temple on the outskirts of the city. In the village, she meets with living archives who graciously share their knowledge with her, helping her to understand her family’s history better. They take her to where the duck pond used to be, but unfortunately, it is no longer there. Her contacts explain that the plot of land recently went under construction to expand the university. The comic ends with Thiessen in the ancestral temple again, lighting incenses while saying “Hi, I’m back”. She then walks through the village while thinking of ducks.

### Time

Throughout Thiessen’s sequential graphic, temporality and temporal ordering are used to frame and shape the narrative. In employing medium-specific affordances, she can move seamlessly between different times (and geographic locations), as seen in these five panels. The date and location at the bottom of certain panels locate the reader in specific times and places – and, with help from the dialogue and other visual cues, allow for connections to be easily made between them. She uses duration, frequency, and temporal ordering to structure her narrative: Through the repetitive images across multiple panels, she slows time and gives space to the dialogue. In other instances she moves quickly between times and locations from one panel to the next, for example in panels 1–6, where she lands in Xiamen and then jumps into her grandfather’s migration story 100 years earlier, where he also moves locations from one panel to the next.

26 Treaty 1 refers to the legal agreement signed in 1871 between seven First Nations (Brokenhead Ojibway Nation, Long Pine First Nation, Peguis First Nation, Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation, Sagkeeng First Nation, Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation and Swan Lake First Nation) and the Dominion of Canada. Treaty 1 covers part of present-day Manitoba, Canada. For more information, see <https://treaty1.ca/>, accessed December 1, 2025.

27 “About”, <https://emilythiessen.ca/about/>, accessed 08.25.2025.

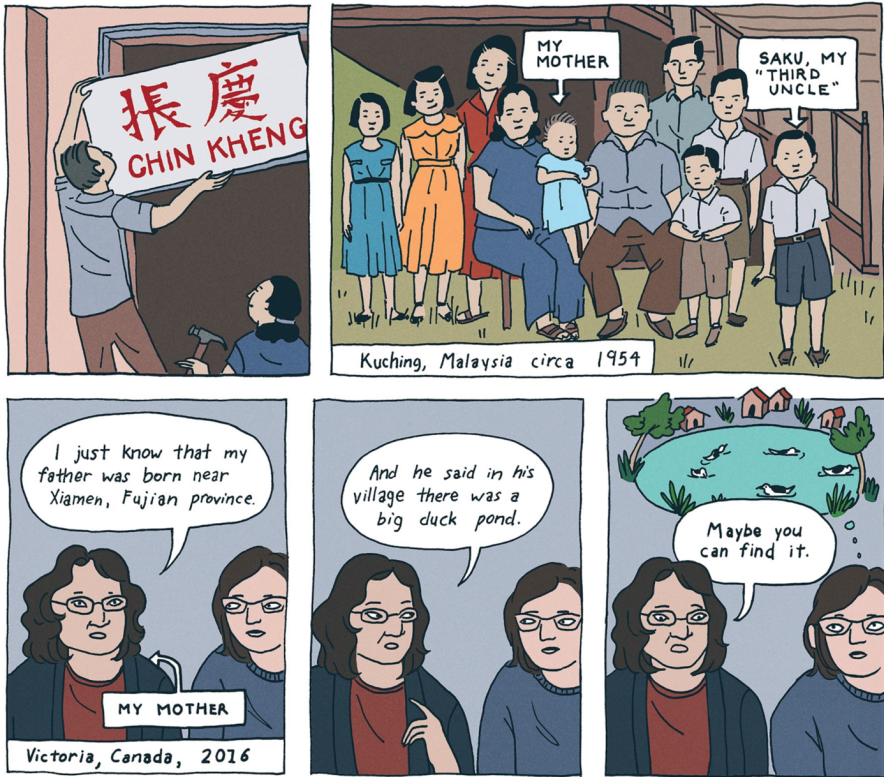


Fig. 3: Panels 11–15

She also engages with temporal ordering and temporality by switching between grammatical tenses: the teller uses the past tense while dialogue, as shown here in panels 13–15 with round speech bubbles, occurs in the present tense. She uses other structural elements to her advantage: Her narrative is organized in a simple and orderly structure with clear frames and consistent use of colour. These give the impression of calmness, tranquillity, and a coherent telling of her narrative. In contrast, had she used overlapping sketches, highly contrasting colours, less borders, or inconsistent gutters (the space between the panels), this would have transmitted a more chaotic or messy scenario or even a loss of time. In portraying some ethnographic insights, this may indeed be desirable.

The images of her mother, first as a baby and then as a grown woman, act as “narrative drawings” that *tell* more than *show* (Groensteen 2007: 162 ff.), albeit here with the additional help of the “my mother” text repeating. In other instances, rhythm, cadence, or the time on a clock could provide similar effects. Thiessen exemplifies this notion on panels 68–76, where she tells us time is moving slowly through the

images: We watch her stand in front of the temple's altar, light incense, and see the smoke rise slowly from it.

### **Narrative world-making**

Even in her short piece, Thiessen actively and successfully builds a storyworld (see Fig. 4). She uses land- and cityscape panels without text to immerse the reader in the architecture of her field site, as shown in panel 21. In the previous panel, as she approaches the cityscape, we can share in her excitement and wonder, as she lets out a "whoa". Occupied by her own narration in rectangular boxes at the top of panels 22 and 23, we can appreciate the diversity of her destination, and alongside her, begin to enter her storyworld.

The details in the images like the red-roofed gates with Mandarin characters (see panel 22), the ornaments of the temple (not pictured, panels 28, 29, 67, among others), an elderly woman's posture (Fig. 5), the use of smartphones (panels 25–27), and so forth bring us as readers into the world and closer to her narrative, effectively telling us more about her field site.

In addition, she uses a map to spatially locate herself and the other geographic sites, which allows her to move the narrative in a particular direction. In indistinguishable text bubbles, she notes when another language is being spoken which she – and now the reader – cannot understand, further immersing them into the storyworld and her ethnographic experience (Fig. 5, panel 43).<sup>28</sup>

In a specific ontologically distinct imagining of a historical account, a monochromatic thought bubble demonstrates how a sub-world can be used effectively to provide additional information pictorially. In panel 44, Thiessen is told about China's Cultural Revolution and how genealogical records were destroyed during that time. A thought bubble rises from panel 45 to portray (see Fig. 6) what she imagines the Cultural Revolution to have looked like. This use of a sub-world allows Thiessen to concurrently portray what happened to her (hearing about the records being destroyed) and an event that happened to someone else (the historical events of the Cultural Revolution).

28 In her complementary article (Thiessen 2019), she also includes other drawings and describes the conception of the 'story' which aided in her narrative world-building.

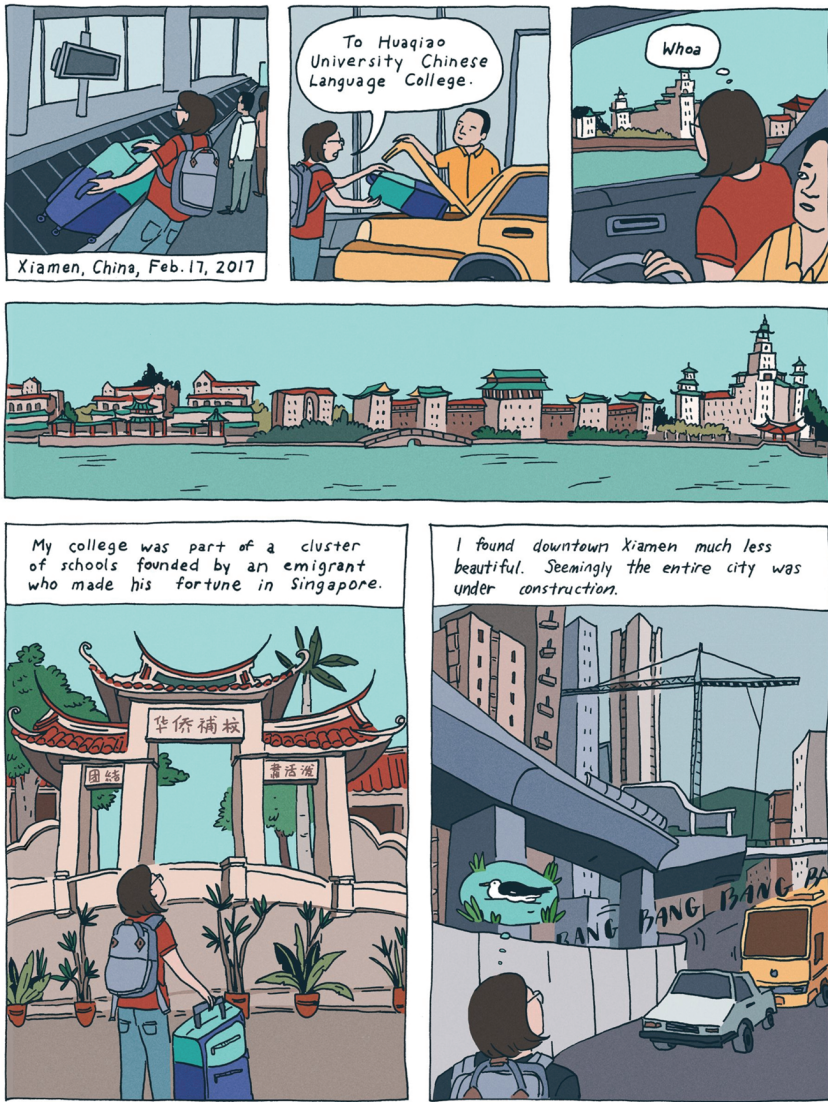


Fig. 4: Panels 18-23

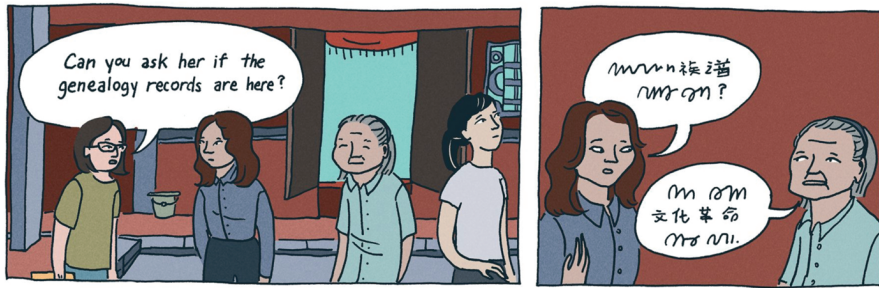


Fig. 5: Panels 42 and 43



Fig. 6: Panel 44, with the thought bubble lead

### Focalization

In “The Duck Pond 鸭母屈”, Thiessen is a first-person narrator, which allows her to move between external (extradiegetic) and internal (diegetic) levels. She uses a combination of affordances to maintain or easily switch between these levels. Right angle boxes in white at the top or bottom of certain panels tell the story from her first-person narrator perspective (as in panels 22 and 23 above).<sup>29</sup> Throughout the

29 Narratologist Wolf Schmid’s sub-chapter on ‘Types of diegetic tellers/narrators’ (2008: 95–97) can be particularly helpful for navigating narrator positions. A diagram shows how the teller can exist on a spectrum between internal and external positionalities. Schmid grounds each point along the spectrum with an example. And while these examples derive from fictional texts, they are concrete illustrations of the impact and importance of explicit reflection concerning teller and, by extension, focalizer positions.

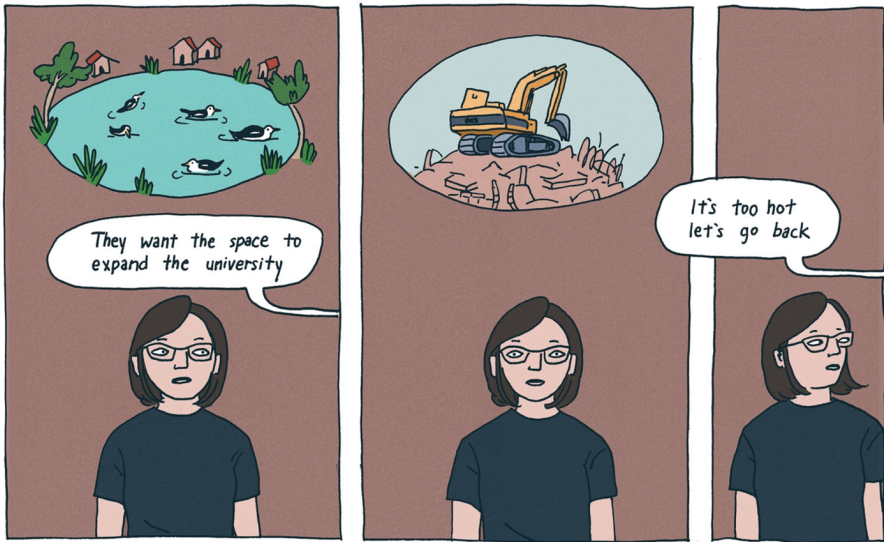


Fig. 7: Panels 58–60

narrative, she introduces other protagonists like her mother, Saku, or the elders in her grandfather's village (shown above) and uses speech bubbles to let them speak for themselves. Diverse representations of other character subjectivities play less of a role in this work, which follows the conventions of first-person narration and auto-ethnographic narratives. We can see, however, how she visually portrays them in facial expressions, in postures and movements, or by showing her father's migration to Malaysia. She also taps into her own embodied thoughts through strategic pictorial thought bubbles without text, which gives the reader the effect of knowing what was going on inside her head at that moment (Fig. 7).

### Nuance and complexity in sequential graphics

I want to return briefly to what Chatman referred to as the 'what' of the narrative (story), namely its events, setting, and characters. Thiessen's example in dialogue with the foundational information concerning the narrative elements of time and narrative world-making highlighted many intricacies of the sequential graphic. I worked to point out medium-specific affordances that enabled or supported added nuance and complexity through these 'what' elements and why they function that way. In addition, to reiterate Fludernik, it is the experience of the protagonists of a narrative which allow readers to immerse themselves in a different world (2009: 6) – and Thiessen, through her auto-ethnography, and as protagonist, was able to achieve this in a theoretically complex but insightful manner.

The importance of temporal ordering and the ability to seamlessly integrate the three facets I discussed concerning focalization added to 'the way' she produced her narrative (Chatman's narrative discourse). In doing so, she could simultaneously show her experiences while imagining a distant past (migration story/Chinese Cultural Revolution) and, through illustrations (of posture, facial expressions, etc.), brought us closer to others' subjectivities despite the first-person narration characteristic of an auto-ethnographic narrative. The combination of these elements, the 'what' and 'way' of the narrative, and a deeper understanding of the narrative theory contained within them allowed for her ethnographic insights to take prominence. As a reader, I was not distracted by the medium or the narrative style, but rather text, illustration, and the medium-specific organization of both together created a layered and complex presentation of her results.

### **Communicating ethnographic insights**

Consistent with the theme of this special issue, I focused here on the potentials of sequential graphics for ethnographic storytelling and transmission of knowledge through a conscious and deliberate understanding (and use) of formal narratological concepts.<sup>30</sup> Theodossopoulos and Bonanno (2025: 15) end their contribution stating that "anthropological drawing is now conceived not just as an alternative form of communicating, but as with all types of ethnography making, 'a form of analysis that opens up new venues for thinking'" (quoting anthropologist van Wolputte 2022). It is not lost on me that trans-disciplinary knowledge application is difficult, and formal narratological elements can seem far removed from the conversation surrounding ethnographic insights and sequential graphics. Yet, I hope I have shown otherwise: They are indeed intricately linked. Utilizing narratological knowledge, both classical and postclassical, can help those of us using ethnographic methods to arrange visual and textual elements to add nuance, complexity, new voices, coherence, embodiment, distance, chaos, or whatever is needed to best communicate the ethnographic insights we are trying to share. In this process, Westmoreland's words remain with me: "it is imperative to provide some guidelines" (2021: 78), and in this instance, I believe these in narratology-grounded considerations are a good place to continue this interdisciplinary discussion; an answer to Theodossopoulos and Bonanno's invitation "for serious analytical work, constructive critical thinking, and forward-looking innovation" (2025: 15) at the intersection of illustration, prose, and ethno-

30 There are without a doubt also limitations to its use – most notably the ability to draw or work with illustrators, see Eisner Will 1985: 122–23 for some ideas and warnings about author-illustrator collaborations; and the works in the ethnoGRAPHIC series or Illustrating Anthropology exhibit for examples where the collaborations resulted in amazing artistic pieces communicating complex ethnographic insights.

graphic research. For those of us working with just text, this discussion, aided by the visual sequential graphic example, can make visible the power of understanding narratological concepts and skilfully applying them. Naturally, they are just as valuable in increasing nuance and complexity in vivid, scenic representations of fieldwork experiences as in other forms of textual, narrative-led ethnographic storytelling.

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