

<b>Institution:</b> University of Glasgow (UofG)		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 26A Modern Languages and Linguistics		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Use of photography by Mexican state Government's secretariat for migration (SEZAMI) to create new competition programme to support Mexican migrants		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2013–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Nathanial Gardner	Senior Lecturer in Spanish	2007–present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> June 2017–31st December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Migration from Mexico to the USA in pursuit of a better life has been happening for over 140 years, and almost half of people from the Mexican state of Zacatecas reside in the US. Gardner's research into how photography can counter the 'invisibility' of marginalised groups has helped shape inclusion activities of SEZAMI, a government agency in Zacatecas that has supported migrants from and back to the region since 1999. Based on his advice, SEZAMI expanded its arts programme to include adult migrants, launching an online competition allowing migrant photographers to self-represent. This competition helped counter feelings of invisibility, and reconnected participants and exhibition viewers to Zacatecan traditions and community.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>A programme of research by Dr Nathanial Gardner has focused on the use of photography as a medium for self-representation. His research has demonstrated that photography is a powerful tool for marginalised people to represent their own experiences. Gardner showed that the use of photography by individuals from marginalised sectors of Latin American society (such as migrants) can afford them a greater social presence by allowing otherwise socially invisible citizens to represent themselves [3.1].</p> <p>Gardner found that photography is distinct as a medium because it is more widely accessible, and its essential skills can be more readily acquired than, for example, drawing or painting, which lends itself to inclusion. Photography also enables a subject to represent their circumstances in a way that connects the viewer and the viewed more than other forms of representation. In other words, it can be relatively easily used by individuals to represent their lives and experiences, whilst at the same time being readily understood by its audience.</p> <p>Gardner's research builds on Maya Goded's photographic narrative on sex work in Mexico City, which provided new insights into the daily lives of sex workers, for example highlighting the violence and struggle in that world that is often ignored [3.2]. Gardner's analysis found that Goded's photographs communicate the existence of power structures that influence the daily lives of sex workers, but which are often obscured by hegemonic narratives. He showed how Goded's photography identified gaps in existing knowledge of Santa Muerte religious customs used by sex workers, demonstrating how photography can reveal rituals and ways of life that otherwise go unrecorded. Gardner thus demonstrated that photography is especially well-suited to enable in-depth study of social lives and rituals in this subaltern sociocultural context.</p> <p>The social networks of migrants share some similarities with those of sex workers, because they are often hidden, either deliberately obscured, or ignored by most people because their reality is uncomfortable. Migrants and sex workers often face serious challenges including lack of</p>		

acknowledgement of their living conditions by governments and institutions, due to illegal processes that interrupt their personal and professional environments. Migrants' lived experiences may also often evade many other forms of documentation, and documentation relating to their lives are often not within their control or direction – for example, official records. Photography can therefore be a powerful tool for migrants to convey their world for all the same reasons: it is less mediated, is under the direct control of users (enabling them to represent themselves on their own terms), and viewers tend to perceive photographic images as trustworthy, giving them a sense of direct connection or engagement. This was the basis on which Gardner convinced the SEZAMI to adopt the form for their art competition programme aimed at fostering empathy for migrants.

Gardner has also devised a new methodology for studying Latin American photography based on an examination of the work of Latin America's foremost living photographer, Graciela Iturbide [3.3]. He argues that Latin American photography should not be read from the perspective of exoticism, as it often has been, but should instead be understood as a visual witness of Latin America; one that offers otherwise inaccessible insights capable of subverting existing narratives such as exoticism regarding that region.

Gardner's body of work on the ability of photography to convey alternative and valuable new perspectives of Latin America has been further enriched by his analysis of Enrique Bostelmann's photography. Bostelmann showed that visual narratives can be understood as photographic testimony. Gardner's research expanded on this, focusing on the truth-value of photography, especially its ability to narrate with less mediation, and its capacity to represent marginalised and under-represented sectors of Latin American society [3.4].

### 3. References to the research

- 3.1 Gardner, N. (2018) [Mediating marginality through photography: Kent Klich's El nino: Children of the Streets Mexico City](#). Photography and Culture, (doi:[10.1080/17514517.2018.1465650](#))
- 3.2 Gardner, N. E. (2018) Witnessing the subaltern: Maya Goded's representation of sex work and violence in Mexico City. *Confluencia*. 33(2), pp. 15–29. (doi: [10.1353/cnf.2018.0002](#))
- 3.3 Gardner, N. (2017) [Visual witness: a critical rereading of Graciela Iturbide's photography](#). *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 35, pp. 174–194. (doi:[10.7560/SLAPC3510](#))
- 3.4 Gardner, N. (2014) [Enrique Bostelmann: fotografía como testimonio visual](#). *Romance Notes*, 54(1), pp. 111–128. (doi:[10.1353/rmc.2014.0021](#))

**Quality:** Publications 3.1–3.3 are linked to a competitively awarded, peer-reviewed Spanish Government Grant (2016–2020, ref no. Q3210001) for which Gardner is a key contributor, with PI Rosario Martin Ruano at the University of Salamanca. The research is expected to meet or exceed the 2\* threshold.

### 4. Details of the impact

The [SEZAMI](#) (Secretaría Zacatecano del Migrante) is a Mexican government body, based in the state of Zacatecas, a state deeply affected by migration as it is estimated its population of 1.5 million is [matched by Zacatecans in the USA](#). Since 1999, SEZAMI has worked with migrant communities in Mexico and the United States, including legal and [other support](#) for repatriated and deported individuals back in Mexico, as well as fostering integration and inclusion for

migrants in the USA. They use visual arts to raise awareness about migration, including art competitions with public exhibitions for children to represent their experience of migration. This practice was effective but only included children, and drawings can be ambiguous as a means of expression. In 2017 Gardner, who had worked for over 14 years with local government in Zacatecas, was invited to join SEZAMI's academic advisory committee to advise on widening their approach and diversifying reach.

Acting on Gardner's advice, SEZAMI introduced a new competition in 2019, encouraging adult migrants to self-represent using photography. It launched in mid-December 2019 and closed mid-February 2020, attracting 32 participants and a total of 155 photographs, and a greater diversity of participants than possible previously. SEZAMI commented: *'working with [Gardner] has made this photography competition ... different and more interesting than the competitions the SEZAMI had previously used to understand migration. [It] has taught our viewers and us that migration is not all about violence or suffering. On the contrary, this new method ... has revealed stories that narrate success, the continuity of traditions and customs, kindness and kinship bonds, love, and (above all) of fraternalism. ... This new initiative had a wider reach than we had thought was possible'*. [5.1]

Although the final report has been postponed, SEZAMI intend to continue the new partnership [5.2]. In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic deeply affected the competition, but also meant that the competition and planned online [exhibition](#) were able to go ahead in some form because of the digital nature of the entries, whereas the existing competition which used children's drawings had to be paused. The plans for seven associated exhibitions and ten workshops in local Mexican communities April–July 2020 were postponed.

The submitted photographs instead now form part of the online exhibition live since 5<sup>th</sup> August 2020, and despite the fact that SEZAMI had to delay the associated launch and media campaign, it has received c.400 visits per month [5.3]. The planned launch would have included local community photography workshops and an outdoor exhibition of the photos, and extended the reach to a much greater proportion of the migrant communities.

Project partner María Dolores García, a psychologist from Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, said of the competition: *'the results evidence an enthusiastic participation... in both the number and the quality of the photographs'* [5.4, 5.5].

Another professor from Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, who supported the project, said of the competition: *'often government initiatives are not able to achieve as close a vision of the quotidian aspects of the migrant experience as your competition has. In this sense, your competition has accomplished two important feats in Zacatecas: to make visible the migrant community as a part of Zacatecas and to preserve its values by enabling a greater comprehension of the migrant's reality'*. [5.6]

Christina McBride from Glasgow School of Art (GSA), one of its panel judges [5.7], commented that the project *'has enabled new narratives to be told often from un(der) represented and unique perspectives within the Mexican migrant community. ... The Digital exhibition has enabled the work to be seen beyond the limitations of a geographic location, across time zones and despite the restrictions of a world-wide pandemic'*.



Figure 1: The winning photograph from Laura Garcia

Testimonials were collected from the six winners on how participation in the new photography competition had affected them. (Testimonials were not requested from all participants to avoid discouraging participation, especially as levels of literacy may vary in the target communities.) The winner, Laura Garcia [5.8a], commented that by causing her to reflect, *'participating in this competition has changed my opinion of migration'*. Her photographs (e.g. Figure 1) focus on *'acts of coming together'* of loved ones separated by migration.



Figure 2:  
Second prize winning photograph by Gerardo de la Rosa (left);  
Third prize winning photograph by Refugio Chairez Arevalos (above)

Second place winner Gerardo de la Rosa [5.8b, Figure 2] said that participation had changed his perspective on the *'culture and traditions from our home country'*, with particular reference to pre-Columbian traditions. He explained *'it has helped me to become conscious of how we migrants continue to maintain our traditions and culture even though we have migrated. This photography competition has taught me to value the richness of our culture every day and to share our traditions with pride'*.

Demonstrating the diversity of experiences SEZAMI were hoping to capture, the third-place winner, Refugio Chairez Arevalos [5.8c], said that the competition *'helped me to reflect on the Mexican cultural, culinary, and artistic traditions that we carry with us wherever we may go'*. Lucia Orozco [5.8d], whose photograph won an honourable mention, said that *'this competition has taught me that to try and represent migration is something that is complex and it is often tainted with sadness'*. He added *'I try to show that the life of a migrant is sad, complex, lonely, boring, and very depressing'*. By contrast honourable mention winner Maria Esparza Mena [5.8e]

said that her participation in the competition caused her to see *'how photography has helped to bring a greater closeness to my family'* and finally Berenice Aviña Ibarra [5.8f] said that it *'helped me to reflect upon what it means to be a migrant and has enabled me to recognise my identity as a migrant'*. The responses indicate that a key impact on the participants was thinking differently of their identity in relation to their home culture and traditions.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Testimonial letter, Eduardo Rios, SEZAMI spokesperson for the project corroborating that the research has changed the SEZAMI's practices. [PDF Oct 2020, combined original and English translation]
- 5.2 Email, Carlos Eduardo Rios Valadez, Head of Information Technology branch of SEZAMI, corroborating SEZAMI's desire to continue collaborating with UofG on projects to help increase the visibility of migration [PDF, untranslated]
- 5.3 Web statistics showing sustained interest in the online exhibition on SEZAMI's website [PDF]
- 5.4 Testimonial letter, Dolores Garcia, Mexican academic partner in Zacatecas who has met with Gardner in relation to the SEZAMI project, corroborating the change in practice and the significance of the new visual corpus that this has generated. [PDF June 2020, combined original and English translation]
- 5.5 Collated copies of the winning photographs from the competition [PDF April 2020]
- 5.6 Testimonial letter, Carmen Galan, Mexican academic partner in Zacatecas who has met with Gardner in relation to the SEZAMI project, corroborating the change in practice and the significance of the new visual corpus that this has generated. [PDF June 2020, combined original and English translation]
- 5.7 Testimonial evidence on the quality, impact, and significance of the photo competition from Christina McBride from the Glasgow School of Art (GSA, a panel judge from the photo competition). [PDF March 2020]
- 5.8 Testimonials from the winners of the photo competition [PDF April-May 2020, combined originals and English translation], corroborating the impact of participation on them.
  - a. Laura Garcia Huerta, winner of the competition
  - b. Gerardo de la Rosa, second place winner
  - c. Refugio Chairó, third place winner
  - d. Lucia Orozco, honourable mention
  - e. Maria Esparza Mena, honourable mention
  - f. Berenice Aviña Ibarra, honourable mention