

**Zeitschrift:** Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft  
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera  
d'etnologia

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

**Band:** 20 (2015)

**Artikel:** "Do you see what I mean?" : following the lines of telling through  
drawing and places

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007237>

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# «DO YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN?»

## Following the lines of telling through drawing and places

Text and Pictures: *Olivia Casagrande*  
 Drawings: *Rafael Jr*

During our first interview, just at the beginning of the dialogical process that would slowly lead to the narration of his life-history, Rafael Jr suddenly interrupted the flow of his words and stared at me. In the cold summer of northern Europe, we were beginning to talk about his childhood on the other side of the world, before the political exile that forced his family to abandon everything: the community, the land, a known landscape and language<sup>1</sup>. Rafael Jr was explaining about the house that they lived in after the military coup. He seemed impatient and, as I understood only later, I was mistaking his attitude for a matter of pain, while it was one of representation – words weren't enough. I was taking notes when he grabbed my pen, asked for a sheet of paper and began drawing.

This article is the result of one-year of fieldwork between Chile and the Netherlands where I have been gathering the biography of a Mapuche family living in Europe for more than 30 years. In particular, it aims at reflecting upon the use of drawing in the construction of personal narratives and life histories. At the same time, the present article wants to show how memory and narration of political events are sometimes conveyed by images of the past that are linked to the tiny yet meaningful objects of everyday life.

The first part of the article takes into consideration Rafael Jr's drawings of his early memories of the political violence that his family had to endure when he was between 6 and 8 years old; while the second part connects Rafael Jr's drawings with the actual places where the events took place more than 40 years ago<sup>2</sup>.

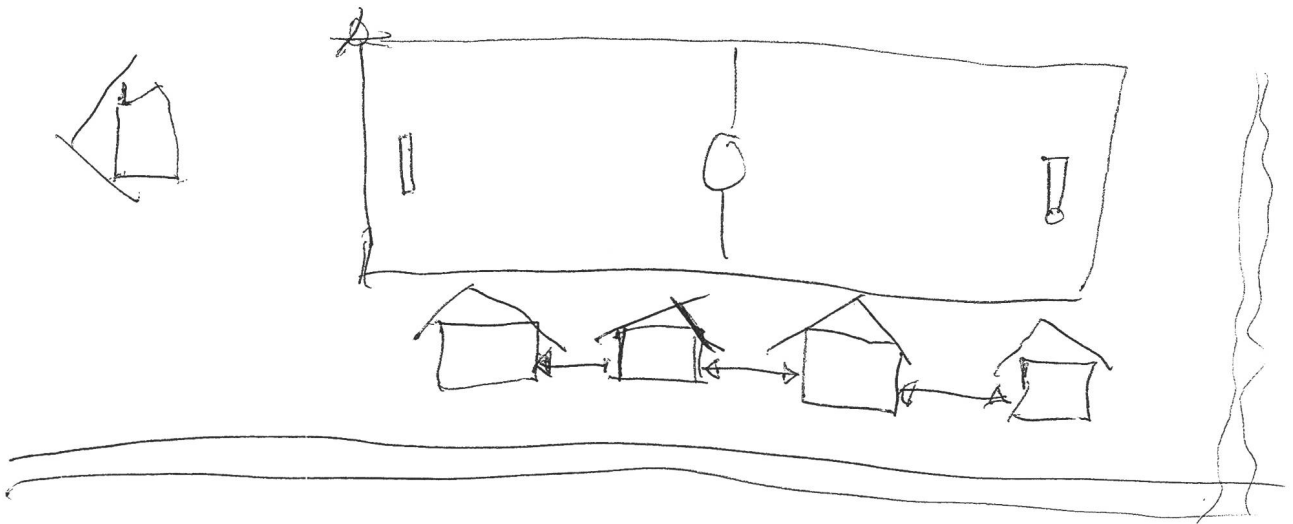
### Drawings: following the traces

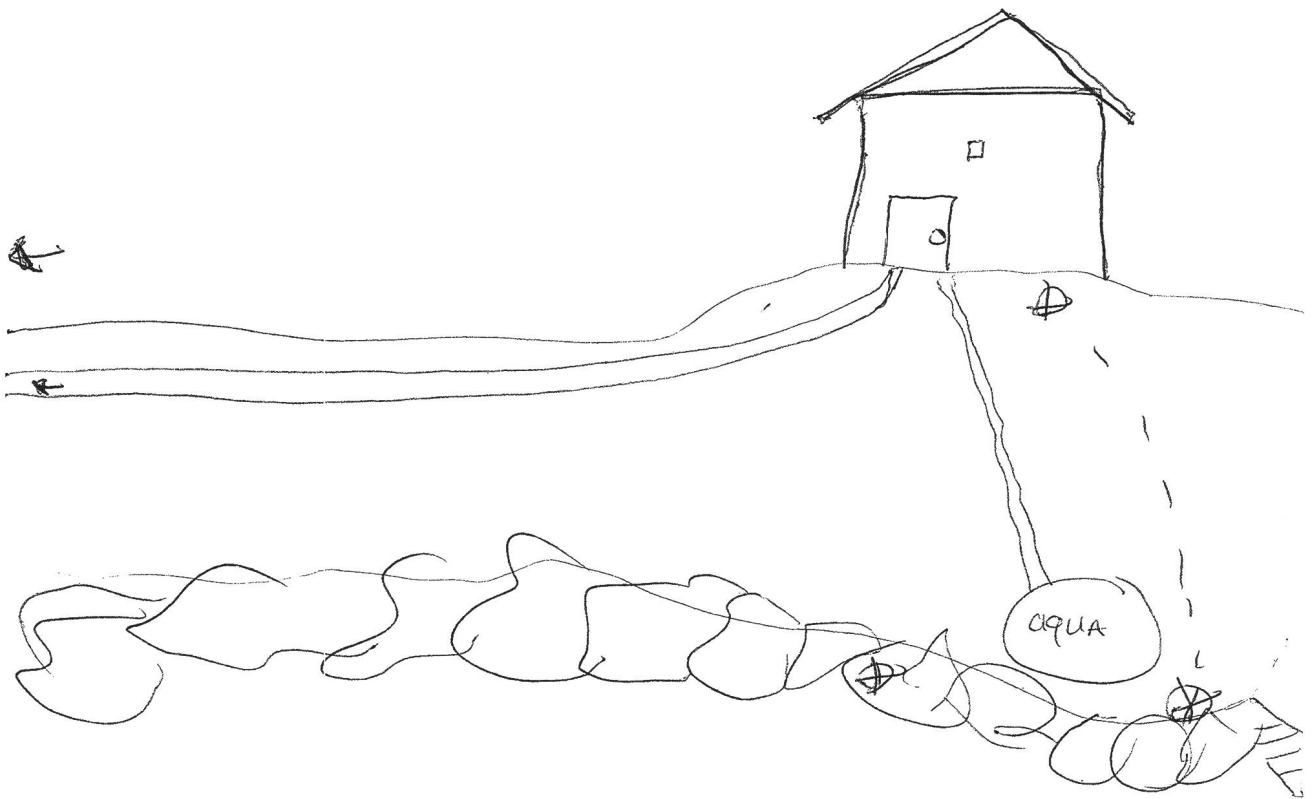
The act of drawing accompanied the whole process of collecting Rafael Jr's life history. He wanted me to be able to imagine places, objects and events, thus allowing me to follow the traces they left in his biography. His sketches on the blank page suggested the world left behind, guiding Rafael Jr's memory during our conversations, while his drawing gesture mediated between his interior images of the past and our dialogical construction of memory in the present.

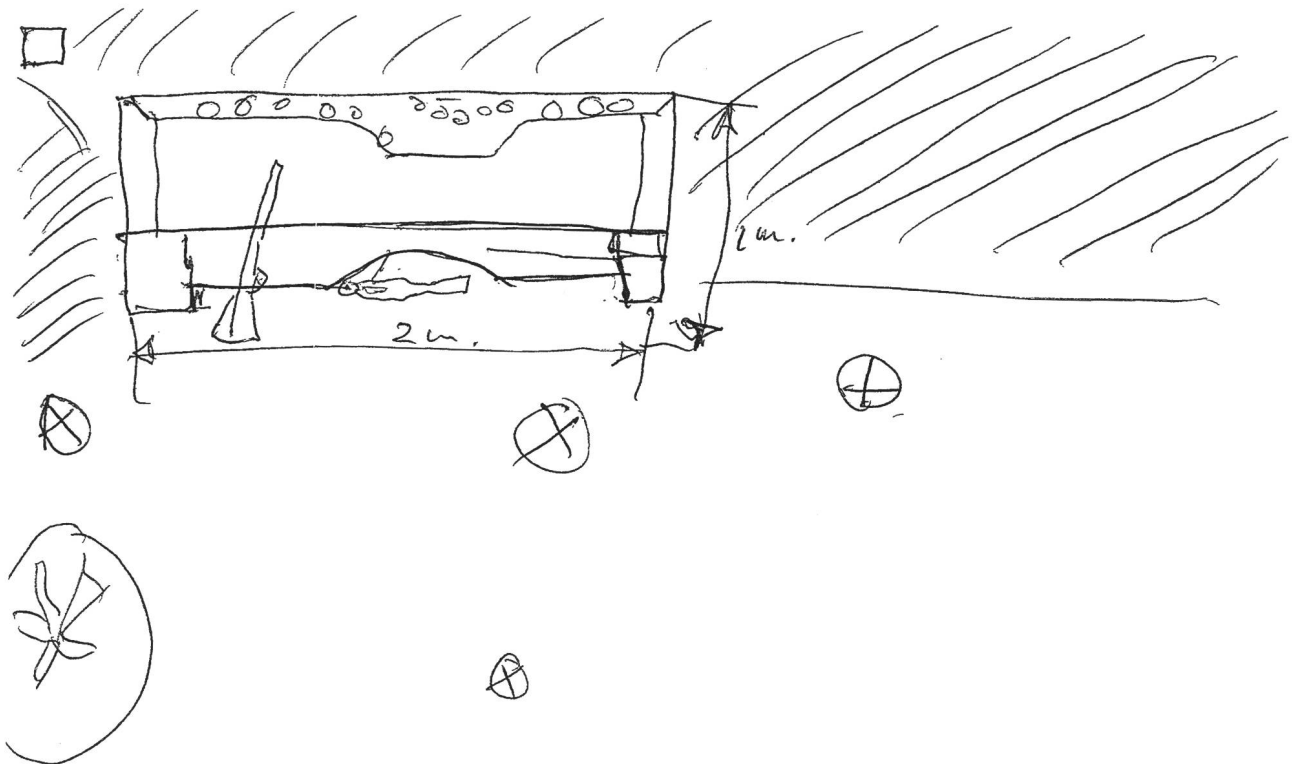
It could be said that Rafael Jr's drawings constitute quite a literal representation of what Fabian called «memory work», where the concept of «work» underlines how memories are not just found by the ethnographer but rather «made by means of

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Jr is Mapuche, the largest indigenous group of Chile. After the military coup in Chile, led by general Augusto Pinochet Ugarte (1973), many Mapuche living in the south of the country were involved in the political repression mostly due to their participation in the struggle for land during the Allende government (1970-1973). Rafael Jr's father, after spending two years hidden, was arrested in 1975 and consequently sent into exile in 1977, together with his family. While no precise data is available to estimate the exact number of exiles during the Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990), it ranges between 200 000 and 1 million (Aguirre, Chamorro 2008: 44-46).

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Anne Lavanchy, Boris Boller and the anonymous reviewers of Tsantsa for their thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this article. My gratitude also goes to the people who agreed to take part in this research, especially to Rafael Jr, José Luís and their families. Their enthusiasm and helpfulness, as well as their critiques, have been fundamental to the research process and to my understanding of the Mapuche reality.













recording communicative-performative events that become protocols when they are transcribed and translated» (2003: 492). The gesture of drawing underlines the performative rather than the textual character of memory, as Rafael Jr's drawing lines on a sheet of paper through the movement of his hand was an interplay between sight and touch, «in an ever-unfolding relation between observant eyes, gesturing and their descriptive trace» (Ingold 2011: 225).

Furthermore, it is precisely the bodily experience of drawing, its being a *making* as opposed to the photographic *taking* (Taussig 2011: 21), that guided my understanding of Rafael Jr's experience. Drawing's capacity to lead the narration towards another direction with respect to that of realism, their being «intimate» and «suggestive», never complete, and therefore meaningful (op. cit.: 13-15) permitted me to isolate some particulars as the center of Rafael Jr's narration.

The first drawing I reproduce here<sup>3</sup> (**figure 1**) pictures a place marked by Rafael Jr's experience of political violence: the football field inside the *Asentamiento*<sup>4</sup> where, one day after the military coup, all men older than 12 were gathered and heavily beaten. In particular, Rafael Jr's memory is concentrated on the image of his older cousin José Luis – 15 years old at that time – crying as he was beaten together with the other men. In the drawing, he represents himself watching a familiar place turning into a site of torture and suffering:

*«As a child you realize... You see things. Near the house where Romero lives now [...] there was a football field that was surrounded by houses [drawing]. There they gathered all the people and beat them. I saw everything from here [drawing the cross-point on the left side], outside... It was the first time I saw José Luis crying... So the little ones knew the military were bad...»<sup>5</sup>*

The second drawing (**figure 2**) pictures the house with the small window that Rafael Jr truly hated as a child. This was due to the darkness that mirrored the harshness of the first years of the dictatorship the family had to endure while residing there. He initially sketched the house, the hill where it was built and the well outside. It was only during the interview that he added

more elements and the drawing gradually began to reveal the moment when his father was arrested. That moment represents a turning point in Rafael's life, as it's after the arrest that his family was forced into exile:

*«It was like this [drawing] behind the well, near the house there were bushes, in this way... He [the father] saw from a distance that the trucks were arriving; he dressed up as a woman and went away [drawing of the arrows]. Afterwards he came back and hid in the yaqui<sup>6</sup> [crossed point in the bushes]... there the dogs caught him. My little brother was playing near there, [crossed point near the bushes], they thought he was hiding and they took him to the house at gun point [dotted line and crossed point near the house]».*

### The absence of traces and the small window

Considering Rafael Jr's drawings as a bridge between Chile and the Netherlands, past and present, during the second part of my research I decided to go to Chile, where Rafael Jr's cousin José Luis guided me to the places that were depicted in the drawings, following the family's trajectories through the landscape.

Taking a leaf from the method of «repeat photography», I photographed the places searching for the traces of Rafael Jr's memories of the past. In repeat photography several pictures of the same place are, in fact, taken at different times in order to compare them and detect change (Smith 2007). In my case, though, I was comparing two contemporary landscapes: that of Rafael Jr's memories and that of present day southern Chile. And while I expected them to be intertwined, both shaping the places where the family lived, I soon realized that everything I was told seemed erased from the rural landscape. Nothing I heard about was there anymore. No apparent trace of what Rafael Jr had drawn: the house with the small window and the football field, the *Asentamiento*. There were just oat fields and more oat fields, almost as if nothing happened (**figures 4 and 6**). Without José Luis' help, it would have been impossible to link the places to the narrations about them. The form of the landscape did not have any clear reference to the memory map.

<sup>3</sup> Rather than reproducing the whole sequences of Rafael Jr's drawings, I will concentrate on the images related to his experience as a child living in a Mapuche community in the south of Chile during the dictatorship.

<sup>4</sup> The *Asentamientos* (settlements) were formed after the expropriation of land by the State in favor of *campesinos* and Mapuche during the Allende government.

<sup>5</sup> All the quoted interviews with Rafael Jr, were done in the Netherlands in August 2012 and were translated from Spanish by the author.

<sup>6</sup> Variations: *Llaqui*, *Yáqui*, *Yaquil*. From the original mapuche *Llaki*, identifying a particular kind of bushes whose roots were used as soap to clean from head lice (Sanchez 2010).



Nevertheless, it is precisely this absence that proved to be eloquent, as the superimposition of drawings and pictures wants to represent (**figures 5 and 7**). Given that the past events pictured in Rafael Jr's drawings were not made present in the landscape through monuments or memorials – as it happened for example in Santiago or Temuco in past years<sup>7</sup> – it is possible to explain this absence in at least two ways.

In fact, Rafael Jr's drawings fall outside the «official» memory of the dictatorship twice: first, from the point of view of the State, by taking place in the Mapuche rural landscape, still little considered in studies and accounts about the violence of the Pinochet's regime<sup>8</sup>; and second by conveying a narrative that concentrates on his personal memories arising from the image of the small window.

Particularly in the third drawing (**figure 3**), while the window is apparently in the periphery of the picture – representing a search by the police whilst his father was hidden in a case – it's presence invades the whole image through the darkness (lines) pervading the room:

*«We felt lonely, we were lonely, [just] among siblings in the house... In that ugly house! Oh, how I hated that small window! Because the light didn't come through... The house was so dark, so dark...! That's probably the reason why they didn't catch my father once when he was at home and they came [...]...because it was so very dark...!».*

The small window somehow represents a mirror reflecting the loneliness and darkness the family endured during the military dictatorship, something that fails to be represented in monuments or memorials. At the same time, while the absence of physical traces of what happened in the places I visited with

José Luís represents a telling void, Rafael Jr's narrative defies the common tale about the dictatorship by shifting the focus away from the political struggle of the left-wing parties. In his eyes as a child, back then in the south of Chile, the «hero narrative» was not restituting his own lived experience. What was at stake for him was neither politics nor resistance, but the loneliness of the sole window and the darkness of the house.

## Conclusion

If drawing isolates something that has to be told through an accentuation of reality (Taussig 2011), we can say that the core of Rafael Jr's memories is the small window, present in both drawings of the family house reproduced here (**figures 2 and 3**). That was – I believe – what he wanted me to see: the tiny detail through which his experience was narrated and his childhood memories were held. An image sombre with meaning that shaped his experience, the starting point of both his drawing and his telling.

It is precisely this particular of Rafael Jr's drawings that provided me with an access to his memories, as I began to consider his experience as a child during the dictatorship in the south of Chile through the image of the small window. By «pulling out a feature» (op. cit.: 93), Rafael Jr's drawings push in another direction than that of the representation of political struggle, showing at the same time how memory and narration take hold of the materiality of apparently minor aspects of everyday life. The images that reconstruct the political memory of those years are not necessarily monuments or public discourses, but rather are bound to small objects and details charged with meaning.

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to the many memorials for the victims of the dictatorship, as for example the *Memorial de Detenidos Desaparecidos y Ejecutados Políticos de la Región de la Araucanía* in Temuco.

<sup>8</sup> Notable exceptions are the works of Roberto Morales (1999) and of Perez-Sales, Bacic, Durán (2001). See also Mallon 2004.

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