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Expositions for a Multimodal Patchwork Ethnography

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Based on the author's own Research Catalogue exposition, *Plant Denizens*, this article introduces the Research Catalogue by asking whether and how a multimodal patchwork ethnographic approach can enhance self-reflexivity in ethnographic research. I argue that this methodological approach hinges on the Research Catalogue's shareability and interactivity, allowing feedback on audiovisual material prior to publication, thereby strengthening self-reflexivity through this discursive, negotiatory process.

▪ **Keywords**: TCM (traditional Chinese medicine), multimodality, multispecies ethnography, multimodal patchwork ethnography, research catalogue

Članek na podlagi avtoričine interaktivne predstavitve *Plant Denizens* predstavlja platformo Research Catalogue predstavlja platformo in zastavlja vprašanje, ali lahko večnačinski mozaični etnografski pristop poglobi samorefleksivnost v etnografskem raziskovanju in na kakšen način. Avtorica trdi, da ta metodološki pristop temelji na deljivosti in interaktivnosti platforme Research Catalogue, kar omogoča pridobivanje povratnih informacij o avdiovizualnem gradivu pred objavo. Diskurzivni in pogajalski proces v ozadju posamičnih objav po avtoričinih ugotovitvah prispeva k poglabljanju samorefleksivnosti v etnografskem raziskovanju.

▪ **Ključne besede**: TKM (tradicionalna kitajska medicina), večnačinskost, večvrstna etnografija, večnačinska mozaična etnografija, raziskovalni katalog

Introduction

This article explores the overlap between multimodal and patchwork ethnography as methodologies, offering opportunities to rethink the researcher's personal sphere in relation to the field as a productive component of knowledge production. It does so through the author's ethnographic exposition *Plant Denizens* on the Research Catalogue (RC)[1] – an open platform that allows collaborative artistic research, as well as self-publishing and peer review, and is well suited for assembling and displaying heterogenous audiovisual media alongside texts. I examine the Research Catalogue in line with multimodal methods that seek to engage with the diverse media forms that are continuously expanding alongside traditional forms of ethnographic writing (Collins et al., 2017) as well as patchwork ethnography, which explores the links between researchers' lives and working conditions and ethnography.

[1] *Plant Denizens* is available at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/3291338/3291339.

Ethnographic writing can be explored as a multifaceted process, layered in and beyond text, weaving in our senses and ourselves. Academic institutions have long imposed a barrier between the researcher's subjective entanglements in the field and the abstractions of research (Storaas, 2009), labeling any encroachment as some form of navel-gazing self-indulgence. However, the circumstances surrounding researchers, as well as their positionality, have grown increasingly relevant. Ever since the *Writing Culture* turn of the 1980s and 1990s which challenged anthropological authority, important discussions about researchers' positionality have developed (Clifford, Marcus, 1986; Abu-Lughod, 2006). Over the years, the importance of documenting the research process while reflecting on who the researcher is and how they relate to the field and the discipline has grown and developed. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of considering how researchers' diverse working conditions impact their research became a key concern from which the patchwork ethnographic methodology stems. Patchwork ethnography considers the changing lives and working conditions of researchers to be an important reflexive component in ethnographic writing (Günel, Watanabe, 2024). It offers "a new methodological and theoretical approach to ethnographic research, which attends to how changing living and working conditions are irrevocably transforming knowledge production" (Watanabe et al., 2019). As such, it reconstitutes the researchers as an inevitable part of their research. The Research Catalogue offers potential to create space for research material often deemed too personal or marginal to text written in formal, academic terminology. It does so by embedding various discursive practices into one interactive and multimodal exposition, in which video, text and other media may be explored in parallel.

In the exposition presented here, my ethnographic research on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) at a Chinese medical university reveals frictions between my positionality as a foreign researcher while drawing on ways in which various contexts converge with my personal family stories. This example reveals how the disseminated elements are part of the ethnographer's negotiations in the field. The videos, for instance, were sent back to the informants for review, and various translations were negotiated while producing the subtitles. Furthermore, the ethnographer's positionality becomes an inevitable part of these negotiations. The Research Catalogue can accommodate various ethnographic elements that researchers gather, reflect on, and use to craft stories. These elements may be photos, sketches, fieldnotes, or videos, among many other materials that make up ethnographic fieldwork as well as how researchers relate to it.

This article is based on my own ethnographic research experience that was part of my dissertation on the importance of intergenerational ethnobotanical knowledge in establishing a sense of belonging through the relationship between people and plants. As part of this work, I published the exposition *Plant Denizens* to illustrate my research process and think through worlds built around medicinal plants through TCM. I addition, I created a semi-animated ethnographic film, the discussion of which goes

beyond the scope of this article.[2] The journey started with a Chinese journal entry in my mother's drawer, documenting her treatment for follicular lymphoma from 2002 onward. Through the course of my research, I explored the herbs she gathered as part of her lifelong healing journey[3] while unpacking the journal entry's context of institutional TCM at a Chinese medical university in Zhejiang, China. On the one hand, the journal entry[4] inspired my mother's practice of gathering herbs associated with her homeland in Poland, despite living in Sweden. This highlighted not only belonging through migration, but also how some herbal medicinal plants transcend national boundaries, drawing foragers like my mother into territories where specific plants spread. On the other hand, the journal entry itself included herbs grounded in TCM. This institutional context differed radically from gathering herbs in Sweden. In my work, I found how two radically different ontologies, like that of Polish herbs and TCM could merge and contrast in surprising ways, yielding transformative potential. The journal entry served as a starting point in my field research, which I conducted at my mother's home in Sweden and at a TCM institution in China. Each time I was presented to someone new at the institution, my interest in my mother's journal entry was reiterated as an explanation or even justification for what I was doing in China. I argue that this process of creating a particular self-narrative is necessarily a "patchwork" (Watanabe et al., 2019), drawing on the self-reflexive process through which a researcher's positionality and sometimes even personal relationships to the field are revealed as part of their research.

Following a brief description of the background to my doctoral research experience, patchwork, and multimodal ethnography, and how I negotiated the content of the Research Catalogue with my informants, I introduce the opportunities offered through the Research Catalogue in terms of user engagement and production of ethnographic material. I guide the reader through the various sections of the exposition *Plant Denizens*, reflecting on how the material came about, the open-endedness offered by situating the audiovisual elements alongside text, and the opportunity to negotiate self-presentation through the heterogenous elements displayed on the Research Catalogue. I finally conclude that a patchwork ethnographic approach is inherently self-reflexive, yet the multimodality offered through the Research Catalogue's interactivity and sharing features makes it possible to respond to the material presented. A multimodal patchwork ethnographic approach hinges on the Research Catalogue's shareability and interactivity, allowing respondents to comment and give feedback on audiovisual material prior to its publication, thereby enhancing self-reflexivity through this discursive, negotiatory process.

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[2] The film *Weedy Kin* will be available at film festivals, and it may be published online in the future. The Research Catalogue only presents the trailer.

[3] This is presented separately in *Weedy Kin* and elaborated on in the dissertation.

[4] See the upper left image in Figure 1, or the upper left image of the exposition *Plant Denizens* on the Research Catalogue.

Background

My doctoral research began during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other researchers, the restrictions posed by the pandemic were a deciding factor in my decision to start fieldwork from home in Sweden, where I was staying with my mother and grandmother. I was among the many anthropologists who had embraced the patchwork ethnographic methodological approach during COVID-19, when discussion around the patchwork approach led to publications discussing methodology (Fratini et al., 2022; Günel et al., 2024; Günel, Watanabe, 2024). Although I initially understood patchwork ethnography as a use of both online and offline ethnographic approaches, it was not so much the physical limitations that defined the methodology as the urgency it spurred among researchers. The working conditions of the researchers themselves, together with the conditions they worked in, were becoming an increasingly important matter of discussion. However, it also became clearer that ethnographic researchers have always done patchwork ethnography (Günel et al., 2024). Defining the methodology as a patchwork revealed the nonfinality of the ethnographic process, essentially exposing the inner, intimate lives of researchers as an essential part of doing ethnography. Coming to terms with my own patchiness along this ethnographic journey, interrupted and disrupted by the pandemic, global crises, and the impossibility of long-term fieldwork, meant writing with rather than against these obstacles.

The "manifesto for patchwork ethnography" (Günel et al., 2020), published during the COVID-19 pandemic, spoke to the lives of many researchers working from home at the time. When it was published, a stream of researchers started responding, articulating the consequences of their working conditions during the pandemic.[5] From research experiences of transnational family mobility (Ammann, 2021; Howald, Jousset, 2024), anthropologists' self-fictions during fieldwork (Chua, 2021), and vulnerability and fatigue (Alava, Robertson, 2022) to grieving the death of one's own ethnographic fieldwork (Fratini et al., 2022), patchwork ethnography resonated with researchers from around the world. These works revealed that working from home was in no way unique to the pandemic. Anthropologists have long been doing fieldwork from home (Hannerz, 2010; Pink, 2020). However, the patchwork methodology approaches reflections of "what forms of knowledge and methodologies emerge *in* and *through* researchers' life and work commitments" (Günel et al., 2024: 212). These realities highlight that requirements to do long-term fieldwork are fetishized and in fact far from common ethnographic research experiences (Günel, Watanabe, 2024). In doing so, they recognize the potentials of stitching together fragments of fieldwork and personal life. Building on this methodological approach, I suggest a multimodal patchwork ethnography to accommodate

[5] In the years following the manifesto, a community of patchwork ethnographers emerged; see https://www.patchworkethnography.com.

the various media and methodological media engagements of the patchwork approach. Drawing on *Plant Denizens*, I suggest that the Research Catalogue is an exceptional tool for engaging with and presenting a multimodal patchwork ethnography.

What is meant by the multimodal aspect of this methodology extends beyond the digital dissemination offered by the Research Catalogue. Multimodality refers to "the fact that ethnographic representation and co-production is itself multimodally embedded in diverse media" (Grasseni et al., 2021: 2). As such, it emphasizes the processes of co-producing ethnographic representation, rather than reducing it to the representation in and of itself. My doctoral material included the use of audiovisual material as a communicative modality, enabling me to share work in progress with informants from China with whom I would negotiate any adjustments. Photos, videos, texts, and audio recordings were part of a negotiatory process through which my presentation of TCM took form. Eventually, these diverse media were presented on the Research Catalogue. Gathering this diverse collection of media was both challenging and helpful. On the one hand, it offered a sense of transparency between me and those involved because I was obliged to share all content and data gathered at the institution. On the other hand, it necessitated complex ethical considerations of studying at a Chinese institution while also, in a sense, studying with students and researchers and being studied by medical specialists. *Plant Denizens* allowed me to engage with these considerations separately, elaborating on them in my dissertation while presenting the final constellation in one exposition with text and conceptual visualizations.

At first, the multimodal approach seemed to involve everything, and my main concern was how to organize such heterogenous media – videos, photos, sounds, drawings, and fieldnotes, among other data – while also making sense of the material, deciding how to put it together, and keeping track of all the ethical considerations, which often differed depending on the material gathered. This process reflects an inherent tension between abundance and analytical coherence that characterizes multimodal work through an ongoing sorting of diverse media (Waltorp, 2021). My initial attempt was to make an ethnographic film following the journal entry from my mother's drawer by tracing its context back to China, where the herbs originate. This was naïve in that it did not consider the interests of the TCM institution I was engaged with. The heterogeneity initially manifested as a conflict between my own interests in learning about the journal entry's contents and the TCM institution's interest in promoting TCM. This meant I needed to engage with the face of TCM that the institution wanted me to present to the world. This negotiation of face became the process through which my exposition took form, as a collective self-presentation of the TCM institution through the people I engaged with. The work reveals this process of moving away from the family story while also accommodating it as part of a self-reflexive journey during my stay researching TCM in China.

The Research Catalogue presents a selection of media that highlight a key analytical tension through which the patchwork methodological process is revealed. The tension explored here is twofold. First, it carries a personal element through the Chinese journal entry from my mother's drawer, documenting her treatment and recovery from 2002. This aspect becomes not only a point of encounter between my mother and TCM, but also a representation of my "self" in encountering the TCM institution in China as an outsider. Second, the institution itself engages in forms of self-presentation throughout my stay in China because informants highlight its distinctly Chinese aspects. My role transforms into that of a mediator with the task of presenting TCM as a modern, national project, responding to the collective self-presentation of the institution.

As an outsider in China, bringing my mother's Chinese journal entry revealed a personal link to the topic; however, my distance to the institutional context highlighted important differences through which my lack of expertise necessitated a form of "studying up" (Nader, 2018) and approaching managers, researchers, and doctors at the TCM institution. Through an openness to learn about TCM through my mother's journal entry, my position as a visiting doctoral student in China was liminal in that my body and my work did not fit neatly into the academic categories of the medical institution I was in, occupying the "interstices [...] the betweenness or in-between spaces of academia" (Howald, Jousset, 2024). I navigated this liminality through occupying a fluid role, spending time with students while joining managers and scholars on field trips to factories and cultivation centers, and being a patient at the local clinic. Being a patient was a deliberate choice to use health issues such as sleep deprivation as part of an embodied methodology, allowing me as a researcher to become vulnerable to and experience TCM treatment firsthand. Although my intention as a patient was to come closer to the experience documented in my mother's journal entry, my body's state became a topic of discussion between the practitioner and other researchers, revealing surprising comments related to my positionality as a foreigner with a body connected to a different place and lifestyle. I only briefly touch on this aspect here because it goes beyond the scope of this article. For more detail, see the dissertation linked in *Plant Denizens*. In this sense, I was studied as a patient and listed to lectures as a student while studying with researchers and giving presentations at the medical university. Navigating what was expected of me as a visiting scholar while not fitting into the medical university's categories of academic work, my engagement with audiovisual media became part of a process of negotiating the self-presentation of TCM in China through patchwork ethnography. The material comprising my exposition is a result of these negotiatory efforts through which informants commented on the material and how it should present them as well as how it should represent TCM as China's national medicine.

Engaging users

The Research Catalogue platform exposes artistic practices as research through "expositions", promoted by the *Journal for Artistic Research* (*JAR*)[6] through which Research Catalogue expositions are published on the same interface. Although my own research was not artistic research per se, the audiovisual elements and ethnographic conceptual drawings likewise reveal otherwise unconventional research practices in a discipline of words (Mead, 2009; Saxer, 2024). Each exposition – derived from Latin *exponere* 'to set forth' (Borgdorff, Schwab, 2013) – could be described as a comprehensive display of research. As such, it exposes the patchwork that is essentially part of all ethnographic fieldwork, however black-boxed it may have seemed until recently (Günel, Watanabe, 2024). Not only does this patchwork consist of doing ethnography from home, but it includes the ethnographer herself as a patchwork; that is, "a figure composed of different parts that move constantly in and out of view, while sustaining multiple fictions and relations" (Chua, 2021: 153). As Chua points out, ethnographers sustain self-fictions that reveal only certain aspects, but which come to comprise themselves in negotiating relationships throughout fieldwork. My exposition begins with how I came to present myself through a Chinese journal entry and my family story behind it at a medical university in China. This presentation is harnessed by the TCM institution to involve me in presenting TCM as a modern, national project in China. The journey from my own affiliation with TCM through the journal entry to my gradual affiliation with the TCM institution required a constant consideration of potential users navigating the open-ended trajectories of two worlds in-the-making, converging and contrasting.

Plant Denizens is an interactive poster (see Figure 1). The collage of images, sounds, videos, and texts can be explored by users. Engaging with users, the Research Catalogue is an interactive form of dissemination, allowing an engaged audience to "co-produce" (Grasseni et al., 2021) the experience of the interface. Users engage in acts of "modification and reciprocal change" (Favero, 2014: 167), granting them a sense of control in navigating the digital content. The degree of control depends on how the material is presented and the kinds of choices users are given. However, the interactive placement of images already ties the images to broader social, material, and spatial contexts, inviting users to further bridge theory and practice (Favero, 2014). Rather than only being a means of dissemination, I saw this as an opportunity to document my research process, eventually integrating it into the final output. Not only did this goal motivate me to gather and organize heterogeneous media, but it helped me think through my material with constant consideration for how it may make sense to a potential user.

Although the exposition is not an interactive documentary, or iDoc, multimodal anthropology explores similar user engagements in the context of iDocs. Paulo Favero

[6] Available at http://www.jar-online.net.

(2017) explored them as tools for producing ethnographic evidence. He argues that it is the open-endedness of thin description that should be embraced and that writing generates unavoidable reductions. iDocs provide an opportunity for viewers to navigate documentaries as they desire, lending them a sense of agency in how the story progresses, and thus a more "open-ended observation" (ibid.: 61). Collins et al. (2017) looked into how the shift from visual anthropology to multimodality has the potential to transform disciplinary boundaries, demanding that anthropology be highlighted as a "work in progress" (ibid.: 4). This open-endedness and nonfinality allows researchers to enter a dialectic with a viewer, demanding that researchers lose control of their "story" (Favero, 2017: 58). The loss of control is precisely what manifested during my fieldwork and became good to think with as both a methodological approach and an analytical tool. Consideration for the user puts emphasis on the self-presentation of TCM, which became an important aspect of my dissertation because my interlocutors focused on its presentation to potential users.

Although I carried with me the story of my mother's Chinese journal entry and her recovery, it played an entirely different role at the TCM institution. My interlocutors in China agreed to publish the work as part of my research under the condition that it remain a research-oriented part of my dissertation, and that I would present TCM in a positive light. This process of negotiating how I presented TCM with others at the institution and the integration of the final material into the Research Catalogue is what I mean by the self-presentation of TCM here. Despite being requested to present a coherent image of TCM, the material is divided and presented one context at a time, breaking with the idea of one coherent self-image. Although the Research Catalogue allows me to publish the material as research, how I presented it demanded negotiations. In no way could I present the entirety of what TCM is about in one dissertation, let alone one exposition. I was guided through various institutional contexts, a selection of which ended up being presented on the Research Catalogue after complex ethical considerations between individuals and the institutional context that go beyond the scope of this article. Here, I limit my inquiry to the negotiation processes that informed the presentation of TCM in *Plant Denizens*. In what follows, I summarize the exposition's layout, the parts of which I gradually elaborate through this article.

The contexts included in the exposition are a TCM institution, a pharmacy, a factory, and an herb identification fieldtrip with students. These contexts were included for acceptance of the footage, images, and texts by the people involved. I later added the video collage *Fragile Roots* to the Research Catalogue, presenting an example of complex environmental considerations through a medicinal orchid, as well as a link to a game called Spot the Plant,[7] revealing a "cryptic" medicinal plant that responds to

[7] This game was shared with me by a biologist I interviewed, who agreed I could link to the game on the Research Catalogue and in the dissertation.

human extraction through camouflage, decentering the otherwise all-too-human perspective of plants as passive resources. As the user scrolls from the top left image of the exposition, the embodiment of medicinal plants is revealed through various contexts, eventually reaching a selection of environments where medicinal plants grow. To illustrate this move, I included two conceptual drawings and the poem *Ode to the Weeds*. These sketches and creative writing were part of my research process in making sense of the material. The horizontal axis at the top leads through a brief description of my mother's relationship to the journal entry to the trailer for an ethnographic film called *Weedy Kin*.[8] An English translation of the journal entry reveals my mother's bodily transformation throughout her treatment. Alongside the translation, various "gatherings" reveal contexts in which various herbs are brought together – be it in a prescription, at a pharmacy, in a factory, or outside. Because gathering medicinal plants was familiar to me from home, and this was the reason my mother found TCM familiar, I saw the various institutional contexts as "gatherings", in which herbs were brought together. This focus highlighted the relationships between herbs, the body, and the environment rather than following an individual species. The additional environmental contexts were to situate TCM within the environmental tensions the institution was dealing with, further elaborated in the dissertation itself. This ethnographic patchwork illustrates a tension between national forms of belonging and a planetary belonging, in which plants are agential coresidents. The face of TCM revealed on the Research Catalogue is one that grapples with this tension in response to the rapidly transforming modern world. This is a process that is open-ended, partial, and essentially a work in progress.

A multifaceted patchwork

As a configuration of ethnographic patches, *Plant Denizens* resembles the patchiness of the scattered plants explored in the project, encompassing the multiple sites presented in parallel. These patches consisted of medicinal plants used at home and in China, presenting the ethnographic exploration of the researcher's personal sphere of home in relation to the field. Although the two contexts diverge along separate axes, their various elements converge and contrast. In this section, I gradually break down each element of *Plant Denizens*.

The journal entry

The exposition *Plant Denizens* unpacks a Chinese medical prescription in a journal entry found in my mother's drawer during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prescription

[8] *Weedy Kin* is a film that constitutes another part of my dissertation, focusing on how the journal entry informed my mother's own herbal practices. This is a separate narrative beyond the scope of this article.

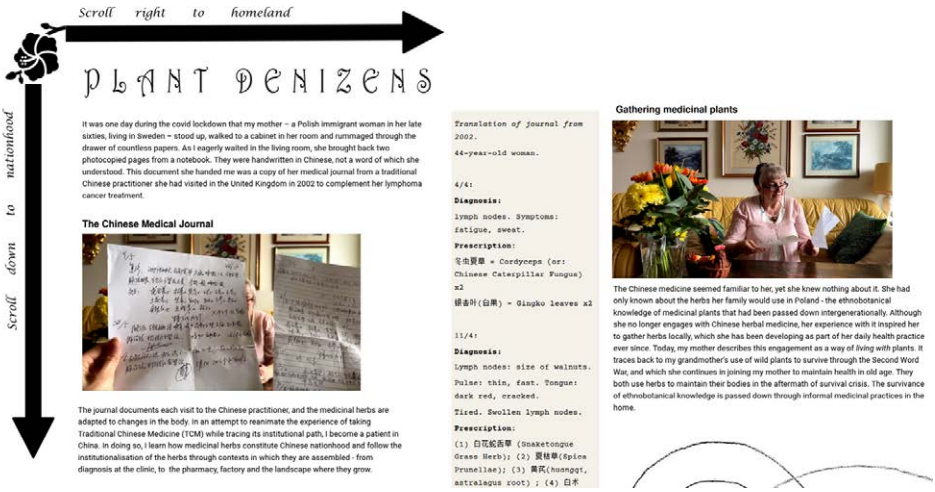

Figure 1: Screenshot of the exposition *Plant Denizens*.

was given to her in 2002, as part of complementary treatment for follicular lymphoma. Following this treatment, she began a lifelong practice of gathering medicinal herbs. The Research Catalogue centers around that experience through highlighting the transformative capabilities of medicinal plants – knowledge of which is often passed on intergenerationally. Although my mother knew nothing about the traditions of Chinese medicine that inspired her to gather herbs, the journal entry is a point of encounter through which these unfamiliar remedies transformed her body. Beginning with the document itself, the user may either scroll right to explore the brief "homeland" trajectory or scroll down to explore the "nationhood" trajectory and a translation of the journal entry from Chinese to English. These trajectories complement and reflect the analytical paths explored in my dissertation.

In my dissertation, the layout of the exposition *Plant Denizens* mirrors my own journey to making sense of how the Chinese journal entry becomes a point of contact between two otherwise distinct ontologies – that of TCM and my family's practice of gathering herbs. This is not unlike what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing described as "ontic enactments" (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2019), in which divergent temporalities emerge from friction between disparate differences, eventually coordinating "both difference and touching" (ibid.: 241). I refer to this "touching" to approach my initial wonder at what makes TCM seem so familiar to an herbal practitioner like my mother, referring to an embodied and multisensorial aspect of this familiarity in which the senses are not divided (Dureau et al., 2013). Moving from the impersonal focus on the journal entry itself, it made sense to openly recognize that my mother had been the focus all along. Perhaps her transformative encounter with TCM could be understood as a point

of "touching" in quite a literal sense. After having translated the journal entry, it was clear that it documented her treatment, including intimate, bodily details of her gradual recovery – the beat of her pulse, the color of her tongue, and her complexion—all centered around her body. I purposely blurred this idea of touch to communicate the embodied aspect of my inquiry, in which the overlap between the senses may work to reveal both the effect and affect of medicinal plants, one not being able to exist without the other (Grasseni, 2021). I intended to explore how medicinal herbs come in touch with, and thereby also mediate, our experience of the world. Using heterogenous media, combining audiovisuals and text, was an attempt to come into closer touch with that encounter, and to highlight the agency of medicinal plants. The patchwork could be described as a configuration of differences and "touching" through which the unfamiliar is made familiar, making the Research Catalogue an exemplary tool for disseminating material collected from seemingly divergent sites. This configuration is inevitably sensorial because it attends to the body.

Attending to the researcher's personal sphere has long been explored through works relating to "intimate ethnography" (Waterston, Rylko-Bauer, 2006; Waterston, 2025), paving the way for doing ethnography from home through intimate others at home.[9] My turn toward a more intimate ethnographic approach from the home initially started as an outward-oriented journey, only to come full circle into a "dialectical" (Waterston, 2025) relationship between my personal sphere and the sociopolitical conditions that encompass it, including the otherwise distant context of TCM in China. In this way, intimate others such as family and kin, as well as other species (Ramirez, 2025), may come to be connected to larger events in surprising ways (Walley, Elliott, 2025). The journey is nonlinear and part of a reflexive process through which the researcher becomes aware of her own involvement. This nonlinearity aids ethnographic exploration (Favero, 2017). In the context of interactive forms of dissemination, as Federico Musso suggests, the user is provided with "an agency over narration" (Grasseni et al., 2021: 150). Following the anthropologist's research path through interactive interfaces such as the Research Catalogue may complement classic "thick description" (Geertz, 2005) with sensory, so-called "thin" elements – the elements I initially relegated to my personal folder. This thin description embraces "nonknowing as a stance of suspending the ethnographer's analytic certainties" (Hartigan, 2017: xvi). As part of the embodied experience of doing fieldwork, involving the senses becomes a personal matter involved in exposing the researcher's uncertainties. In my own fieldwork, multisensoriality came to attend to the body embedded in the journal entry itself as simultaneously personal and made tangible. The Chinese journal entry is both material and bodily. On the one

[9] The term *intimate ethnography* variously refers to anthropology at home, autoethnography, native anthropology, or ethnographic memoir (Walley, Elliott, 2025: 122). I refer to intimate ethnography for the sake of simplicity, and also because I find the work of the authors that coined the term, Barbara Rylko-Bauer and Alisse Waterston (2006), relevant to the intimate stories in my work.

hand, it is an artifact from my home that I could carry to China to investigate further, connecting to the topic on a personal level. On the other hand, it documents my mother's bodily transformation that could be explored through her in terms of affect, and through the TCM institution in terms of effect.

The homeland trajectory

The homeland trajectory is the upper horizontal axis of the exposition *Plant Denizens*. This trajectory reveals how the Chinese journal entry came to inspire my mother's lifelong practice of gathering medicinal plants to maintain her health in the aftermath of illness. The content is mainly descriptive because the film *Weedy Kin* constitutes a separate part of the dissertation, introduced on the Research Catalogue but presented as a separate work. However, the trailer to the film is viewable and users can search for after it is published online. The exposition summarizes the film, revealing the main story behind the prescription in the journal entry. This story is about my mother's cancer recovery and became an important aspect of my self-presentation at the TCM institution. This self-presentation also became an important aspect of the research process in negotiating my role as a foreign researcher.

The fieldwork began with an outward-facing focus on translating the journal entry, followed by a tentative plan to eventually travel to China to trace the institutional context of the journal entry. This initial plan was impersonal, and I hesitated to make any direct association with myself, my family, or my life. What I had not realized at the time was that the journal entry was already personal, and that what had been handwritten in Chinese was a detailed account of how my mother's body transformed during her treatment. Having already planned a visiting scholarship at a Chinese medical institution to attempt a "follow-the-thing" methodology, I tried in all ways possible to avoid contaminating my research with the personal sphere of home, limiting the journal entry to the drawer where it was found and its broader ties to TCM. Upon doing so, the void of untold stories haunted my dissertation. These stories were recorded, noted, and hidden in a separate folder that I would visit out of my own personal interest. The pieces I eventually sought were in this personal folder, where recordings of my family's testimonies and the trips to gather herbs were becoming increasingly relevant. Journeying into their internal lives seeped into my own reflections on being a researcher.

During fieldwork at the institution in China, I was often expected to be skeptical toward TCM, and people would emphasize TCM as a modern institution with advanced technologies. They often wondered what I was doing there. In response, I reiterated my story from home: "My mother is a cancer survivor. She received TCM as a complementary treatment and I am curious to learn about TCM and the various herbs documented in her journal entry." The reason was concise yet personal. It reveals affect while expressing an openness to learn more and stepping away from the personal, familiar narrative. Because the prescription my mother received was from a clinic in the United

Kingdom in 2002, it did not represent the national, upscaled institution of TCM. This was often pointed out to me as an important difference because so much has changed since then, particularly in response to various crises that transformed TCM. My use of the Research Catalogue mirrors a process through which my story offered an entry to understanding TCM in China, only to be harnessed by the narrative of a modern nation that is nonetheless vulnerable in the context of the Anthropocene.[10]

The nationhood trajectory

Throughout my fieldwork at home and in China, the face of TCM was under public scrutiny throughout Western media when stories of the COVID-19 pandemic's origins sought blame in China's trade in exotic animals for TCM. These stories held Orientalist assumptions that were a result of sampling rather than scientific scrutiny: "Scientists were looking for coronaviruses in exotic animals, and they found them" (Kirksey, 2020: 14). However, upon having my mother's journal entry translated and hearing her story, it was revealed to me that all animal ingredients were substituted with plants, minerals, and fungi due to import restrictions at the time. I became curious to know how a plant could possibly substitute for an animal in TCM. This possibility seemed at odds with the media's single-species focus on animals. The exposition reveals a wide range of species, most of which are plants, used in TCM and how they are assessed in assemblages of various herbs rather than single-species narratives. Although I felt lucky to have been officially invited to a Chinese medical institution as a visiting scholar, my recordings, notes, and sketches from that period felt distant and impersonal. Busy researchers, clinical workers, doctors, pharmacists, and factory managers had been incredibly generous to guide me through the institution of TCM. Worried that a foreigner like me would harbor suspicion toward TCM and its legitimacy, they focused on the face work of TCM as a modern, technologized medicine. Having only three and half months to explore the topic, the patches of institutional field sites tracing the trajectory of herbs from field to clinic reflected my own distance as a foreigner.

A contrast between the labeled trajectories as "homeland" and "nationhood" emerges as personal versus impersonal, respectively. This contrasting distance is sensed by the user and distinguishes the family context from that of the institution in China. Scrolling down, one encounters the infrastructures built around the TCM herbs they sustain. The worlds built around the herbs reflect the power herbs are perceived to hold, including and supported by the national narratives around TCM. The further one scrolls down from the initial image of the medical prescription, the more detached it seems from my mother's own, informal practice of gathering herbs. The videos presented reposition my mother's story in the present context of TCM as a modern, upscaled industry while

[10] The term *Anthropocene* was coined by Nobel Prize–winning Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 to propose a name for the current geologic epoch, in which humans are greatly influencing the Earth's ecology.

touching on brief moments when the two trajectories align – the clinic, the dried herbs in the pharmacy, the challenging identification of herbs, and the ongoing consideration for species and environmental tensions. Despite these convergences, the trajectories ultimately diverge and require distinct, place-specific considerations. The exposition's layout thus highlights a key tension between the personal and the institutional context, bringing personal experiences into exchange with broader environmental issues and questions of scale.

Much of the content presented in the exposition is footage I could not use as part of one coherent film. This was due to the complex ethical considerations and sheer complexity of the topic that demanded a more open-ended contextualization, as in interactive platforms. The Research Catalogue affords this possibility and makes it possible to present content often relegated to a visual anthropologist's archive. Several videos along the nationhood trajectory present people through a cartoon filter. While editing the videos, I had initially intended to use animation to anonymize footage in China. This turned out to be possible through the use of the cartoon filter, anonymizing faces in the editing program.[11] This footage is only included on the Research Catalogue, in which many participants preferred not to be identifiable, and in which animation holds the capacity to ensure their anonymity (Hamdy, Moll, 2024). The footage that had not been anonymized in this way was often seen in terms of promotional potential or as a pedagogical tool. The videos were sent back to informants for review on an ongoing basis, becoming a kind of communicative modality through which their presentation of TCM was negotiated. Using my own familiarity with gathering medicines as a starting point, I found the idea of gatherings in terms of assemblages more tangible to follow throughout the contexts. Eventually, I presented the exposition in a way that mirrored how I tried to think through the material. The user may read the text and choose to watch the videos for a more immersive experience.

The gatherings

As one scrolls down *Plant Denizens*, four "gatherings" unfold various assemblages of TCM herbs across different contexts. These contexts reveal the diverse practices through which medicinal herbs are gathered, beginning with the body in the clinical encounter, the pharmacy where herbs are assembled for patients, the factory where herbs are processed and prepared, and an herb identification class in which herbs are identified and gathered. Each gathering considers the herbs beyond singular species and traces a trajectory of TCM herbs from clinic to field. It made sense to enter into dialogue with the conceptual and methodological tools of science and technology studies (STS), which has long delved into how humans and nonhumans "hold together". This use of "gatherings" is inspired by the STS approach to assemblages to illustrate how holding

[11] DaVinci Resolve was used for video editing.

together may look through these diverse contexts. The point of this was not to explain what TCM is, but to trace how capturing contexts throughout the TCM institution may reveal a sense of continuity and familiarity. Herbs were indeed gathered, although in different ways. At the same time, discontinuity and difference incidentally emerged into tension within these tropes – for instance, in the different forms of specialized knowledge required in each context.

Gathering one: The clinic

Scrolling down the Research Catalogue, one can choose to read the translated prescription from the journal entry and watch a clip of my own clinical diagnosis as a patient. Taken together, these excerpts complement one another, providing details on what clinical diagnosis and treatmentat a TCM clinic may involve. This informs users about the effect of medicinal plants through focusing on the body and the various ways these effects are sensed. The text under the video highlights an ethnographic detail that reveals how TCM theory categorizes the herbs into Confucian hierarchical principles of imperial governance for structuring herbal formulas, each with a specific effect on the body. The names of these categories reveals the broader institutional cultivation of Chinese nationhood through TCM. The purpose of participating as a patient was an attempt to come closer to the embodied experience my mother had of being a patient at a TCM clinic. The direct observation of diagnosis and how it manifested on my own body made the concepts more tangible to someone like me, with no background in TCM theory. Connecting my own illness experience based on specific symptoms to the practitioner's explanation, as well as my own treatment journey, provided sensorial depth to the fieldwork and topic. My mother's journal entry began to feel more familiar, and it became easier to discuss its contents with the practitioner. The diagnostic experience sparked a greater dialogue between me and the practitioner, who could reflect on her observations during my visit.

Gathering two: The pharmacy

Gathering two presents the pharmacy where herbal formulas are assembled. The distance posed by the industrialized, high-paced rhythm of work conveyed the institution's large scale. However, the tactility of herbs and the constant opening of drawers and sorting convey an act of gathering and bodily engagement. The pharmacy video was filmed in a way that excluded their faces. This is because the workers wished me to do so, but it also amplified my focus on their rhythm of work, their hands, and the rhythmic soundscape of wooden drawers, rustling herbs, and shuffling feet. The text following the video quotes the lead pharmacist, who explained the coexistence of traditional work with modernized industry. It is an ethnographic excerpt from an interview, emphasizing the centrality of the body in the work, including contamination from herbs and how the drawers are arranged to follow common prescriptions.

Gathering three: The factory

The factory clip is followed by two quotes from the factory managers, highlighting the work involved in modernizing China's national medicine. The distance between me and the workers is clear because I could only take photos and promised to anonymize the worker's faces in editing. As such, the images capture only fragments of movement, whereas the audio forms a rhythmic, patterned collage of sounds sampled directly from the factory. The distance sensed between me and the workers mirrors my distance as an outsider being shown factory labor and work processes. An excerpt from one of the factory managers presents how industrial processes follow strands of continuity with traditional practice while also adapting to technological change. The use of technologies in Western medicine is referred to as a strength that TCM harnesses to its own advantage.

Gathering four: Identifying herbs

Finally, a video of an herb identification class explores foraging for herbs as a sensorial, bodily practice that is as much defined by "touching" and knowing as it is by the struggle to differentiate and the limits to knowing. Gathering the wrong herbs could have consequences because some plants are poisonous. This practice of gathering plants aligned most with what I was familiar with from home. Despite obvious differences in plant species and the level of formality, I could join students in learning to explore various plants through their sensorial engagement with the environment. The user joins my journey with the class, observing the various ways students learn to differentiate medicinal plants, often in a playful manner. The teacher Guan guides the students throughout the trip, sometimes emphasizing the difference between informal and formal terminology to distinguish the elevated status of institutional TCM. Explanations often include how the herbs affect the body. The text below the video is an excerpt from the trip when the teacher Guan refers to a common Chinese saying, referencing a classical novel, to describe the difference between an herb and its deceptive look-alikes.

Video collage: Fragile roots

The lowermost presentation, *Fragile Roots*, is a video collage following a medicinal orchid across two contexts – a tea tree forest in which it thrives with little human intervention, and a cultivation space within the university where it is planted. The section serves as a methodological contrast to the assemblage model discussed earlier. The video collage begins with another separate video created by Sun Fei as part of the promotional purposes of the tea forest owner, Chunliang, on the Chinese social media platform WeChat. It features me while I film him presenting various medicinal orchids in his forest. Following the promotion, the researcher Zhu Bo introduces the cultivation of orchids in the institutional context, after which my video of Chunliang concludes the collage. Each of the videos presents different perspectives – Chunliang's promotion of medicinal herbs growing in his tea forest, the researcher Zhu Bo's institutional

authority and formal knowledge, and my observational video of Chunliang, including my conversations with him. Interestingly, the orchid was seen as somewhat invasive in Chunliang's forest, despite being an endangered species. Upon reviewing the video, the tea forest owner was interested in getting in touch with the researcher presented in the video. The researcher likewise expressed curiosity about the orchid varieties and informal terminology used to describe the orchids. My inclusion of the collage reveals best how my research process took place, traveling between informants and in conversation with their perspectives. The negotiation expanded beyond my own work to become part of a mediated conversation between Chunliang and the researcher.

Although one context presents another institutional cluster, it is instead contrasted with a context in which the same plant thrives in its own habitat in Yunnan, in southwestern China. In both cases, the plant is admired for its medicinal power and is a source of national pride for traditional medicine in China. Focus on one species presents a stark contrast to the previous "gatherings". The video collage reveals what the previous contextual videos could not. The focus is on understanding how the contrast between these contexts reveals important environmental tensions that emerge in single-species narratives that are never just about one species. The orchid was no longer just a medicinal herb, but first and foremost an upscaled commodity, used for cosmetic and medicinal purposes and no longer limited to TCM practice. These environmental tensions lay beyond the formal TCM clinical practice, which emphasizes the substitutability of herbs, and the reason the video collage is placed on the outermost edge of the exposition to follow the conceptual layout.

A cryptic plant

The bottom right section of the exposition presents a cryptic plant, the highland fritillaria, which, according to a botanist I met, responds to human harvesting through camouflage. This botanist's theory decenters the otherwise all too human perspective of plants as passive resources. A game, Spot the Plant, created by the botanist's research group, is linked, inviting the user to attempt to find the plant within a limited time. Below the photo and game, an excerpt from our conversation reveals social and environmental tensions with human predation for TCM. The section is placed under conceptual drawings to emphasize the environmental focus and perspectives gained from outside the institutional context. This is the only section in which the user can play a game, engaging with the form of sensory enskillment the botanist is referring to. This enskillment draws on an important tension between skill and environmental vulnerability. Although the game spreads awareness of important environmental issues associated with the plant's endangerment, it also trains the user to recognize a plant that is camouflaging itself from human predation. Tensions between knowledge of plants and the limits to knowing are brought up in different ways throughout the exposition.

Conceptual drawings and poem

In between the trajectories, a drawing presents how the two contexts overlap conceptually, reflecting the setup of the exposition itself, in which the agency of medicinal plants extends from the "body" to the "Earth" in an artistic rendering. This visualization was intended to highlight the transformative capabilities of medicinal plants on humans, despite the disproportionality of human influence on the Earth's ecosystem conveyed in the overall work. The drawing is accompanied by another sketch featuring various plants mapped on a body. The two sketches represent how I saw a visceral overlap between the two contexts because the way medicinal plants were approached often mapped onto the human body. Sketching while brainstorming was one way I made sense of my material through my attempts to visualize conceptual links, providing a glimpse into an important part of my research process. The poem *Ode to the Weeds* is a personal expression of how I connected to medicinal plants and sought others that may have connected in similar ways, seeing them as more than mere weeds.[12]

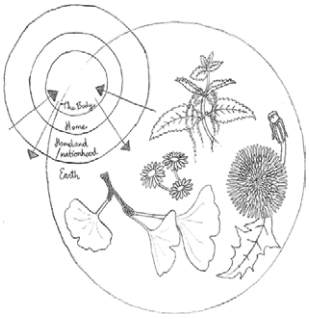

Figure 2. Conceptual illustration from *Plant Denizens*. Illustration by the author.



Figure 3. Conceptual illustration from *Plant Denizens*. Illustration by the author.

[12] This is what I refer to as "more-than-weed" entanglements in my dissertation to highlight medicinal plants in terms of their belonging.

Conclusion

Plant Denizens showcased my application of multimodal methodologies to convey a multifaceted patchwork ethnography. The exposition on the Research Catalogue presents people that know medicinal plants in different ways. Part of this has to do with the diverse specialized knowledge required to industrialize and upscale TCM, as opposed to the informal herbal medicine practiced at home. Taking these clear differences into account, I was curious to know what made TCM seem so familiar to my mother, who knew nothing about it. It was her familiarity with gathering local herbs and drinking Polish herbal teas that led her to feel TCM had the potential to help her recover. This familiarity had everything to do with the senses, and there was no direct rationalization behind her choice, apart from that it felt right. Gathering plants and having some idea about medicinal plants was something she assumed is universal. This collapse between the affect and effect of medicinal plants revealed important motivations behind the practices of gathering medicines presented in this work. In an attempt to locate that sense of familiarity, I decided to approach TCM in terms of the materialities built around the medicinal plants, but that nonetheless depends on the plants' ability to transform humans. This approach resonated with the patchwork ethnographic methodology that informed my perspectives from home, and how they changed in the institutional context of TCM in China. This gradually became evident as I was shown factories, clinics, and large-scale systems built around TCM by the professionals guiding me, while also requesting that I present these contexts as proof of TCM's modernity. Regardless of my personal story about my mother's Chinese journal entry, my positionality as a foreign researcher from Europe placed me on the receiving end of China's institutionally performed facework of modern TCM. The exposition reflects this journey of two divergent trajectories, related to very different traditional medicines, developing from a single document from my mother's drawer.

This article began with the question of whether and how a multimodal patchwork ethnographic approach can enhance self-reflexivity in ethnographic research. Although my personal ties to the research topic may have constituted my self-presentation as a foreign scholar in China, the story eventually lost its personal relevance. In other words, my mother's journal entry was a tangible piece of evidence through which I could define my positionality to TCM to others. In response to my interest in the topic, I was met with the self-presentation of TCM as a national medicine, emphasizing my position as a foreigner. I was being lectured as a student and a foreigner, and I studied with students and researchers, while being studied as a patient. This face was negotiated between the people I met but also involved my presentation of TCM as part of the multimodal work. My role as a researcher became a medium through which to present TCM to the world, and the audiovisual material circulated between informants as part of our negotiations. I emphasized the negotiatory aspects of my approach to presenting TCM as an open-ended part of the research process.

The Research Catalogue may also be seen as part of the negotiatory dimension of my approach. As mentioned earlier, the Research Catalogue's interactivity allows users to respond to the content and navigate in various ways. Furthermore, all content presented on the Research Catalogue had already been negotiated by me and those involved. In this way, its final presentation could be thought of as the final, yet open-ended, negotiation with a potential user. The exposition allows images, texts, and videos to be presented alongside one another, inviting users to explore the exposition in a nonlinear fashion. Navigating the exposition, the user explores the intersection at which the document from my mother's drawer reveals the far-reaching, modern industry and institution of TCM. Despite the institution's expectation that I would portray an image of TCM, the opportunities afforded through the Research Catalogue allowed me to display a dynamic patchwork that defies homogeneity while revealing tensions, questions, and vulnerabilities in a world in transformation. I invite researchers to explore the possibilities of a multimodal patchwork ethnographic approach, in which the portrayal of self-reflexivity exposes elements of the research process while becoming subject to open reflection, loss of control, and part of the negotiatory process of doing ethnographic research.

Research data statement

The author states that the article is based on ethnographic research materials that are not classified as research data. All additional information concerning the ethnographic research materials are available on reasonable request with the author.

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Predstavitve za večnačinsko mozaično etnografijo

Članek raziskuje preplet večnačinske in mozaične (ang. *patchwork*) etnografije kot metodoloških pristopov, ki ju imenujem večnačinska mozaična etnografija. Preplet pristopov prikazuje primer etnografskega raziskovanja v okviru interaktivne spletne predstavitve *Plant Denizens*, ki je objavljena v mednarodni bazi Research Catalogue (RC). Raziskovalno-umetniško zasnovana predstavitev

je dostopna prek iskalnika na spletni strani Research Catalogue, bralcem pa priporočam, da jo raziskujejo med branjem tega besedila.

Moje doktorsko raziskovanje se je začelo med pandemijo covida-19 in ravno s pandemijo povezani ukrepi so bili odločilni dejavnik, da terensko delo začnem na Švedskem – v domačem okolju, kjer sem živela z mamo in babico. Prvotni načrti za terensko delo na Kitajskem so bili začasno ustavljeni. V tem času mi je mama pokazala dnevniški zapis iz leta 2002 o svojem zdravljenju folikularnega limfoma s tradicionalno kitajsko medicino (TKM). Njen zapis je postal nova tema moje doktorske disertacije.

Spadam med antropologe, ki so med pandemijo covida-19 sprejeli metodološki pristop t. i. mozaične etnografije, in sicer ravno v času, ko je o tem pristopu nastajala dolga vrsta publikacij (Fratini idr., 2022; Günel idr., 2023; Günel, Watanabe, 2024). Ta metodologija omogoča premislek o raziskovalčevi osebni sferi v odnosu do »terena« kot produktivne sestavine v produkciji védenja.

Pojem večnačinske metodologije presega zgolj digitalno diseminacijo, ki jo omogoča RC. Večnačinskost se nanaša na »dejstvo, da sta etnografska reprezentacija in koprodukcija sama večnačinsko umeščeni v različne medije« (Grasseni idr., 2021: 2), zato poudarja procese soustvarjanja etnografske reprezentacije, namesto da bi se osredotočala zgolj na njeno končno obliko. Večnačinska mozaična etnografija tako izpostavlja, kako terensko delo od doma vključuje večnačinsko koprodukcijo. To se jasno kaže v moji osebni pripovedi o materini bolezni in kitajskem medicinskem dnevniku, ki odpirata možnosti za terensko delo na Kitajskem ter postopoma preoblikujeta moje raziskovanje.

Ob ponovnem premisleku o razmerju med osebnimi okoliščinami raziskovalca in izkušnjo terenskega dela članek zastavlja vprašanje, ali in kako lahko večnačinski mozaični etnografski pristop poglobi samorefleksivnost v etnografskem raziskovanju. Članek RC obravnava kot metodološko orodje za razkrivanje raziskovalnega procesa, odpiranje prostora za povratne informacije ter prispevek k raziskovalčevi samorefleksivni poti. Ta proces naredi raziskovalčev položaj opaznejši in ga vključi v samo raziskavo, s čimer ponazarja mozaično etnografsko metodologijo. Trdim, da uporaba tega metodološkega pristopa v okviru RC slednjega vzpostavlja kot nekaj več kot zgolj platformo za diseminacijo raziskovalnih rezultatov.

Plant Denizens je zasnovan kot interaktivna razstava oz. predstavitev. Uporabnik lahko raziskuje kolaž podob, zvokov, videoposnetkov in besedil. RC kot interaktivna oblika diseminacije uporabnikom omogoča aktivno sodelovanje in s tem »soustvarjanje« uporabniške izkušnje (Grasseni idr., 2021). V predstavitev so vključeni različni konteksti: klinika tradicionalne kitajske medicine, lekarna, tovarna, terenska ekskurzija za prepoznavanje zdravilnih rastlin s študenti, video kolaž o zdravilni orhideji ter botanikovo raziskovanje

skrivnostnih rastlin. Ti konteksti so bili vključeni na podlagi soglasja oseb, ki so sodelovale pri nastanku posnetkov, fotografij in besedil.

Plant Denizens kot konfiguracija etnografskih delčkov mozaika z več vzporedno predstavljenimi lokacijami odraža razpršenost rastlin, ki jih raziskava obravnava. Ti lokalni konteksti razkrivajo, kako lahko nabiranje zdravilnih rastlin – praksa, ki mi je bila dobro znana že iz domačega okolja – oblikuje etnografsko raziskovanje skozi različne osebne pripovedi in refleksije, ki spremljajo raziskovalno pot.