

# Auto-Ethnography: Connecting to the Nearby

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## ABSTRACT

This project delves into the establishment of place attachment in evolving landscapes through an interdisciplinary lens. It starts with the interpretation of the story of A-Fei, a mushroom forager in Yunnan, China from the perspective of multispecies ethnography, revealing that place attachment is tied to the nearby, where everyday interactions with the surrounding landscape can evoke memories of hometown and generate meanings of a new residence. Extending these insights, this project adopts auto-ethnography to examine the author's experiences in the multicultural city of Toronto to explore how she as an immigrant builds an attachment to the local landscape. Through sensory engagement, cultural observation, and interviews of the other immigrants, how magnolias facilitate a new sense of belongings has been found. This project aims to transcend disciplinary boundaries and expand the realm of landscape architecture to anthropologic perspectives. By emphasizing the co-evolution of human and non-human lifeways, it seeks to explore how individuals perceive landscape and build relationship with it

and proposes “ethnographizing landscape architecture” as a value-centered approach for socially impactful and contextually relevant design.

## KEYWORDS

Auto-Ethnography; Multispecies Ethnography; Place Attachment; Landscape Perception; Storytelling

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Uses auto-ethnography and multispecies ethnography to explore how to establish place attachment
- Links embodied experiences and place attachment via multispecies entanglement through storytelling
- Emphasizes “ethnographizing landscape architecture” for value-centered, conscious expression

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## 1 Project Background

Addressing the question—how to build place attachment—goes beyond resolving a personal existential crisis; it holds a broader significance in identifying for whom and why we design, especially as landscapes face more frequent and dramatic changes influenced by globalization and capitalist pressures.

In the context of modernization, landscape design has undergone a shift that aligns with Walter Benjamin's observation<sup>[1]</sup>: information gradually replaces stories. Unlike information that favors efficiency,

stories stem from experiences and emphasize practicality. Stories convey counsel and ultimately impart the wisdom of real life. Today, the disappearance of stories and storytellers reflects our disregard for life experiences, and with it, the wisdom imbued with craftsmanship is also fading. In such a climate, design tends to be overwhelmingly inclined towards systematic scientific support, with experiential or descriptive words like “attachment,” “love,” and “nostalgia” often dismissed as fantasy rather than considered as reliable bases for planning or design decisions<sup>[2]</sup>. This omission can simplify our understanding of place, thereby overlooking the impact of how

humans perceive and value landscapes<sup>[2]</sup>. For example, the neglect of working people's public memory diminishes the importance of vernacular buildings like factories in urban preservation<sup>[3]</sup>.

In a way, landscape architects are also storytellers, narrating stories of place and land. Just as a sculptor must understand their material to create a compelling sculpture, telling a good site story requires the landscape architects "to fashion the raw material of experience [...] in a solid, useful, and unique way."<sup>[1]</sup> Recognizing the "raw material of experience," including individual site-specific memories, is a crucial step in unlocking the untapped potential of place to evoke public memories and to be more socially inclusive<sup>[3]</sup>.

Stories of memories to places have been widely recorded in literature, sociology, and anthropology. Chinese scholar Hong Liang, documenting the stories of her rural hometown, finds that "Society is developing too fast—we don't go home for a year, and when we do familiar roads and trees have vanished [...] This has led to a sense of 'psychological homelessness' and a deep, steadily building sorrow."<sup>[4]</sup> This phenomenon, as anthropologist Biao Xiang observes in his concept of "the nearby"<sup>[5]</sup>, can even affect people who remain in one place. The displacement of familiar environments and growing indifference to surroundings erode the social relations, making people's life more susceptible to external forces like power, capital, and technology.

Anthropology also explores the stories of human-environment relationship from a multi-species perspective. For example, in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's narrative<sup>[6]</sup>, matsutake mushrooms (*Tricholoma matsutake*) become central to the changing landscape of post-industrial forests in Oregon, the United States; Kyoto Prefecture, Japan; and Yunnan, China. In the world-making practices of matsutake, human beings, especially foragers, are only part of this multispecies assemblage. Similarly, Sophie Chao explains how palm oil alters interspecies relations and reconfigures the cosmologies of the Marind people in Upper Bian<sup>[7]</sup>. These multispecies studies challenge anthropocentrism and provide a perspective to understand the landscape as a process of co-evolving with others, including living as well as non-living organisms.

Given this context, the integration of multispecies anthropology into the study of place attachment not only aims to rekindle people's attention to the memory of places and the storytelling of landscapes, but also seeks to broaden the understanding of individual landscape memory from a multi-species perspective. The study wishes to offer a new lens for people to uncover or forage deeper, more meaningful connections with their immediate environments, while also providing valuable insights for landscape architects to create more enduring and contextually relevant designs.

## 2 Methodology

Inspired by Tsing's study, the project began as an exploration into place attachment through the lens of a familiar hometown delicacy—fungi—utilizing ethnographic methods rooted in anthropology. Initially, this project focused on interpreting the experiences of A-Fei, a mushroom forager who lives in Yunnan and has migrated across villages. Through interviews and analysis of his video blogs posted on social media platform Bilibili over five years<sup>①</sup>, the study investigates how A-Fei copes with the estrangement from familiar landscapes and how the process of mushroom foraging affects his perception of landscape, and facilitates his process of rebuilding a connection with the new place of residence.

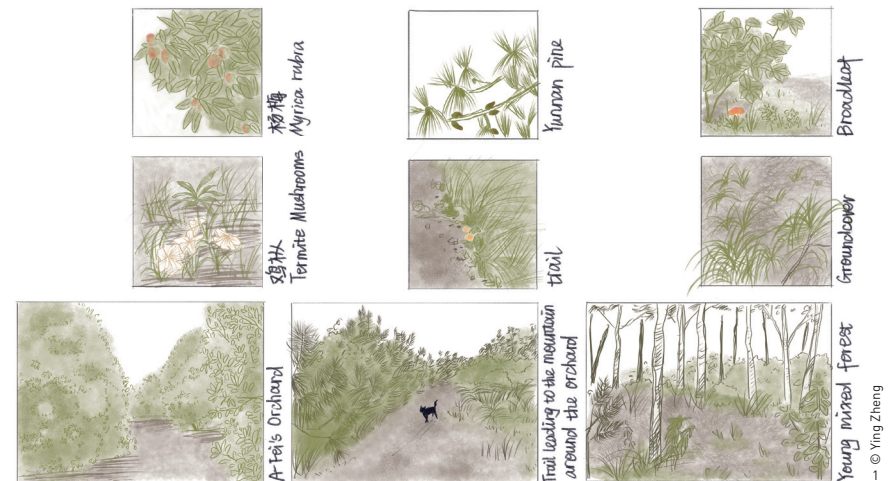
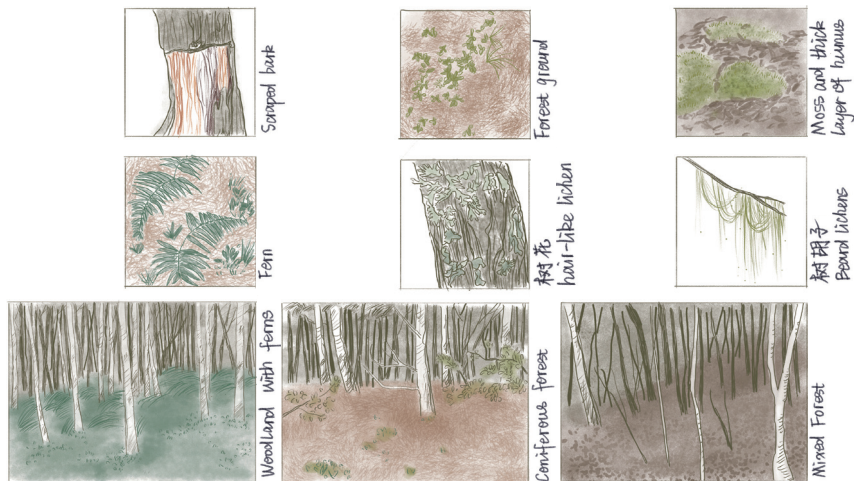
Over time, this project expanded beyond A-Fei's story, to examine the question that whether his experience of multi-species entanglement still have credibility in building place attachment for immigrants facing significant discrepancies in cultural, natural, and social environments. As Walter Benjamin suggests, a listener of stories has a strong interest in the "possibility of reproducing the story"<sup>[1]</sup>. The author, being a new immigrant living in Toronto, decided to recreate "the story" of place attachment in her current surroundings.

This attempt relies on the method of auto-ethnography, which defines oneself as a "participant observer" and analyzes personal experiences within a broader cultural or social context<sup>[8]</sup>. The exploration in Toronto takes a varied form, aiming to perceive the environment with all senses, including walking, observing, interviewing, and drawing. Connecting two seemingly unrelated sites is also encouraged by the multispecies study of the Matsutake Worlds Research Group, which transcends single-agent and single-field research to include multiple players and sites. This broad scope allows the research to cross disciplinary boundaries, encompassing natural history, politics, economics, mycology, sociology, arts, and science<sup>[5][9][10]</sup>.

## 3 A-Fei's Story in Yunnan

Located in the southwest corner of China, Yunnan's distinct mountainous environment makes it a kingdom of fungi. From June to October, a variety of fungi sprout in the forest and become delicious delicacies on people's table. This environment has

① The video blogs can be found from A-Fei's webpage on Bilibili, named "深山吃货" [Foodie of the Mountains].



fostered a rich cultural significance around fungi, encompassing geology, climate, indigenous knowledge of forest ecology, food culture, and commercial trade. A-Fei, as a forager and mushroom cuisine enthusiast, has actively participated in the world-making of mushrooms from a young age.

A-Fei learned mushroom foraging in a small mountain village, Zhongxing Village, where only a few hundred residents rely on agriculture for their livelihood. To make a better living, his family migrated to Yipinglang, a town once prosperous due to salt and coal mining but now declining<sup>[11][12]</sup>. In Yipinglang, A-Fei's family manages its own orchard and A-Fei continues his passion for forest foraging and shares his foraging experiences online.

The species that can be collected differ across forests, as tree species vary between mountains (Fig. 1). The minimally disturbed forests in A-Fei's home in Zhongxing Village are mature and densely covered by ferns, pine needles, or deciduous leaves, depending on the altitude. In contrast, the forests in Yipinglang exhibit a monoculture and appears very open and young<sup>[13]</sup>, shaped by logging and aerial reforestation for industrial development.

Due to the symbiotic relationship between trees and mycelia<sup>[10]</sup> (which can be understood as the root system of mushrooms), different forests host different types of mushrooms. For instance, common species like matsutake mushrooms and koutake mushrooms (*Sarcodon aspratus*, known as Black Tiger's Paw in China) thrive in A-Fei's hometown but are scarce in the mountains near his new residence—the scarcity is likely due to increased human disturbance in the local forests.

But what A-Fei lost can be compensated for by the companions of other mushrooms, as long as he remains engaged with the landscape through similar practices—searching, cooking, and sharing—which helps A-Fei to perceive and connect with the local landscape.

1) Searching (Fig. 2): A-Fei employs the same skills to maximize his chances of finding mushrooms. He identifies tree species, looks for color contrasts, and observes bumps on the ground. In addition, A-Fei always remembers the lesson he learned from his hometown: harvesting mushrooms can be dangerous. Therefore, he is very careful to discard any unknown species in a new environment.

2) Cooking (Fig. 3): although A-Fei cannot find his favorite mushroom, *Phellodon* (named as Eighteen Circles by A-Fei describing its appearance) in the new landscape, his appetite can still be satisfied by other mushrooms that provide similar chewiness.

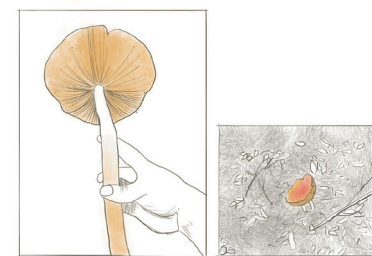
3) Sharing (Fig. 4): whether in his hometown or new residence,

1. The forest condition in A-Fei's hometown (left) and the condition in A-Fei's new residence (right).
2. Searching practice index.

However, I have discovered through A-Fei's story that what is lost can be compensated for by the companionship of other mushrooms, as long as he continues to engage with the landscape through similar practices. These practices involve three key actions.

### Searching

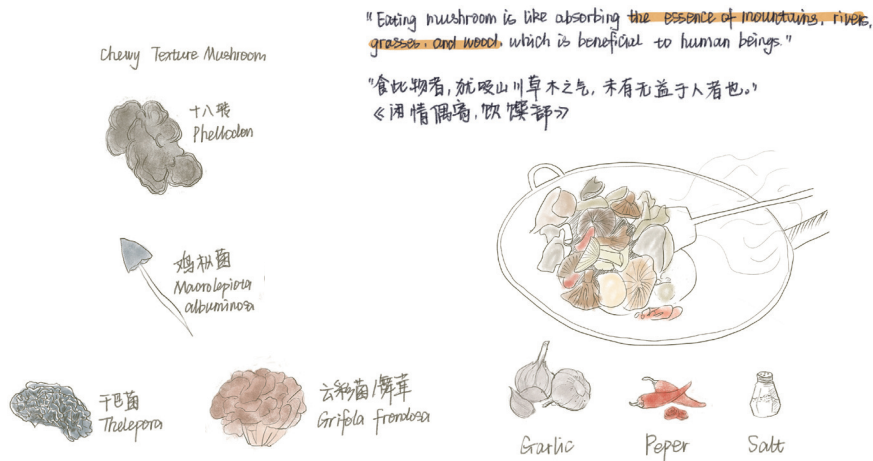
A-Fei learned his searching skills from the older generations in his old home, which have since led him to explore new mountains in the same way.



1. Identify the tree species
2. Search for the color contrast or bump on the ground
3. Check the condition and identify species
4. Never take unknown species back home
5. Check the nearby for one always indicates a group

## Cooking

The second practice involves cooking. A simple approach of stir-frying with basic spices aims to preserve the natural flavor of each type of mushroom. For A-Fei, the most delicious mushrooms are not necessarily the most popular or expensive, but rather those with a chewy texture that he was familiar with when he was young.



3. Cooking practice index.
4. Sharing practice index.

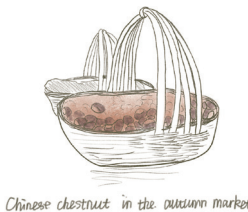
markets are always a place where people share their extra harvests as well as personal encounters.

Having spent years in the hometown, where he regarded the mountains as his playground, A-Fei developed a deep ecological understanding and formed a mental map of the environment through activities like pasturing cattle and harvesting mushrooms. Similarly, a comparable mental ecological map has emerged for

## Sharing

The final practice involves sharing. Any excessive mushrooms or fruits harvested from A-Fei's orchard are sold in the local market. Whether it's the monthly market in A-Fei's old home or the wet market along the street in his new residence, both places display the seasonality of the local landscape and provide a space to share individual encounters with the local community.

Vegetables in the spring market



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his new residence. He now refers to his orchard as the home of termite mushrooms (*Macrolepiota albuminosa*) and continues to explore the surrounding mountains. In the meantime, just as he once learned about mushrooms from the older generation, A-Fei now passes this knowledge on to his daughter and a wider online audience.

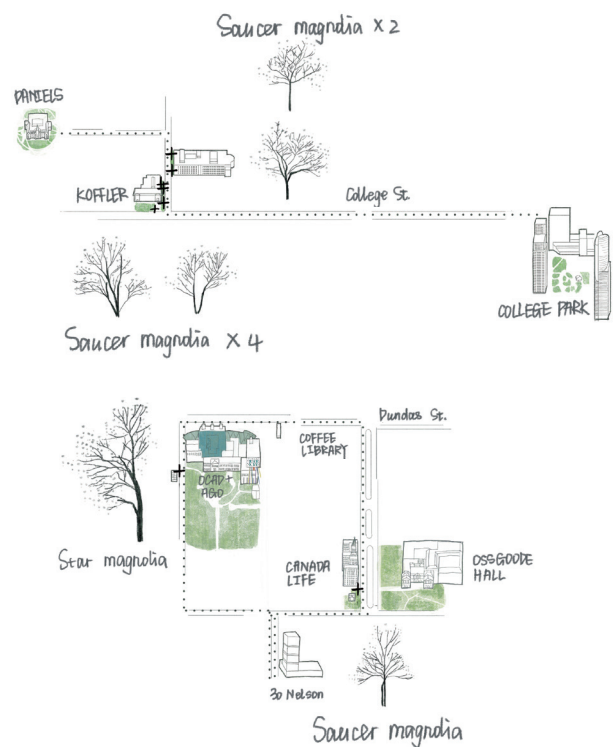
A-Fei also refers to his hometown with the Chinese term “Lao-Jia” (“老家”), which means one’s geo-cultural origin that one may rarely or never visits for various reasons. In A-Fei’s story, Lao-Jia represents more than just a place; it embodies cherished memories and serves as a memento that helps him navigate and connect with a new landscape, ultimately addressing his sense of loss.

## 4 The Author’s Story in Toronto, Canada

The author’s initial attempt to replicate A-Fei’s landscape practices including searching, cooking, and sharing to form attachment began with visits to farmer’s markets in Toronto, reminiscent of the marketplaces in the author’s hometown to buy mushrooms. Although there were some similarities and moments of excitement during the visits, most farmer’s markets lack the affordability, diversity, and accessibility of their Chinese counterparts, leaving a sense of detachment.

After realizing A-Fei’s experience lacks the cultural shift between countries, the author turned to local stories for new perspectives. This led to four interviews with master students of Landscape Architecture—Luis Felipe Bendezu and Dustin Wilson, curator Anqi Li, and anthropology professor Shiho Satsuka.

Unlike A-Fei’s process of deeply co-evolving with mushrooms through daily travel, meals, and social communication to build place attachment, their interaction with elements evoking a sense of place is more fragmented. For instance, Li and Wilson’s attachment to specific locations stems from sporadic visits over a long period. Due to cultural and social differences, forming emotional bonds with a new place often becomes subtler and harder to perceive. For example, Bendezu’s connection to Toronto’s landscape is based solely on the visual similarity of a block to his hometown of Lima, as both have been influenced by French architectural style. Interestingly, sometimes these nuanced connections emerge through contrast rather than similarity. For example, Satsuka links parks in Canada and Japan by reflecting on the differing notions of “freedom” in landscapes—illustrated when she hesitated to let her nephew catch insects in a Toronto park as he would in Japan. These experiences suggest that place attachment is not solely based on specific practices but also on the perspective from which one



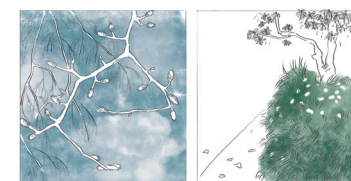
Here's a collage of the other magnolias I saw on my walk through Toronto



Magnolia "Yellow bird"



Star magnolia

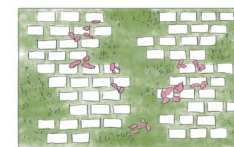


With tree of heaven

With Canada yew



Against a wall



Contrast with powers and grass



Plant with shrub

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observes. Reflecting on these narratives, the author realized her own attachment to Toronto through a story about magnolias.

Memories of cyclical patterns of mushrooms and flowers in Yunnan draw the author to the magnolias in Toronto. Their presence, from furry buds in January to blooming in spring, marks the author's route and shapes her sense of time (Figs. 5, 6).

In this perception, an online friend also tracks magnolias near the ravine, creating a connection with others who share this focus.

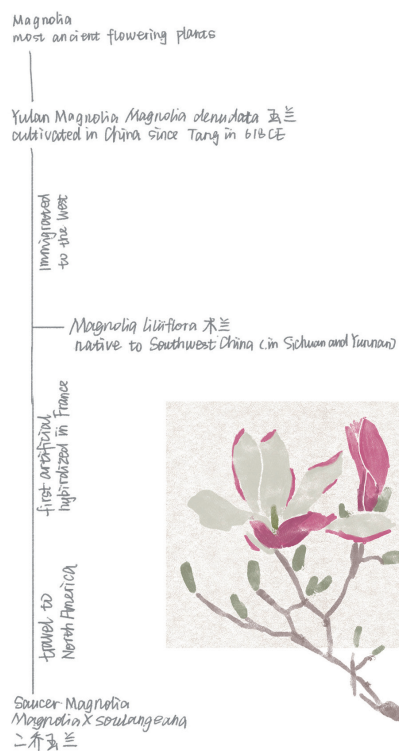
Magnolias enhance the author's awareness of Toronto's textures. For example, the contrast between their white petals and the dark green of Canadian yew (*Taxus canadensis*) sharpens her senses and contextualizes the surroundings (Fig. 7).

The story of the magnolia also travels from the distant hometown to Toronto through the Internet. When the author's father shared a picture of the southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) in his backyard, the author responded by sharing one of the saucer magnolia (*Magnolia × soulangeana*) in return. Although her father may not have noticed that southern magnolia is native to North America, magnolias suddenly become a spiritual connection that transcends space.

Thus, magnolias have become a metaphor. Saucer magnolia, a hybrid of Chinese origin introduced to France<sup>[14]</sup>, then came to North America and established its unique place in Toronto's landscape (Fig. 8). Magnolias as part of the nearby, not only facilitate building place attachment to the landscape but also lend

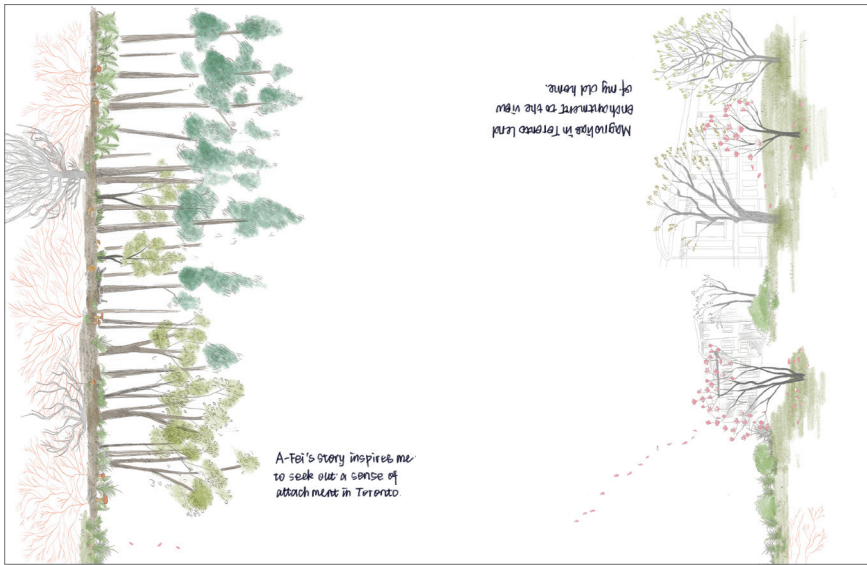
enchantments to the view of hometown.

Till this point, the two stories—A-Fei's and the author's—merge to reveal how distance from familiar environments opens up the possibility of a fresh perspective, while elements from past landscape can shape the understanding of a new ones.



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5. The author's daily encounters with Magnolia in Toronto.
6. Collage of magnolias in Toronto.
7. Magnolia as an integral part of Toronto's landscape texture.
8. Saucer magnolia as a metaphor.



9. The outcome of the project as a double-sided book.

10. Two stories encounter at the center page of the final outcome double-sided book.

## 5 Discussion

The study process of this project is finally displayed as a double-sided book (Fig. 9). When read from the front to the center, it narrates A-Fei's story. When read from the back to the center, it describes the author's journey to find a sense of belonging in Toronto. The center page is where these two seemingly unrelated stories converge (Fig. 10). Although the double book could not be presented face-to-face to share more details, this limitation underscores the importance of embodied experiences in contrast. Just as the charm of a story is best appreciated through in-person interpretation, the perception of place must be felt through all senses. As Masayuki Kurokawa notes in *Material & Body*<sup>[15]</sup>, a sense of security is not an abstract concept; it is a tangible physical experience in everything. The relationship between emotional place attachment and physical multispecies entanglement could serve as a foundation for design.

Additionally, this project aspires to “ethnographize landscape architecture”—a term borrowed from Chao’s “theorizing ethnography and ethnographizing theory”<sup>[7]</sup>—by bridging different disciplines to gain a new understanding of landscape. Auto-ethnography, as a method, enables designers to avoid claiming untenable neutrality while also steering clear of a parochial attitude. This approach allows design to remain a self-consciously value-centred expression, also retaining its evocative and socially just power.

**Competing interests** | The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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# 自我民族志：与“附近”建立连接

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## 摘要

本项目以跨学科的视角深入探讨如何在变化的景观中建立地方依恋。研究首先以多物种民族志的视角解读了中国云南蘑菇采摘者阿飞的故事，揭示地方依恋与我们日常所处的“附近”的紧密联系：与周边景观的日常互动，不仅能唤起人们对故乡（或“老家”）的记忆，还能在新的居住环境赋予新的意义。基于这一理念，本项目进一步采用自我民族志的研究方法，分析作者作为移民在加拿大多伦多这座充满多元文化的城市中，与本地景观建立依恋的经历。作者通过感官体验与文化观察，并结合对其他移民的访谈，发现玉兰花为其塑造新的归属感起到了独特作用。本项目旨在超越学科界限，为景观设计学研究引入人类学思考视角。通过强调人类与其他生命的共同演化，探讨了个体如何感知景观并建立与景观的关系；同时，本文提出的“将景观设计民族志化”作为一种具有价值导向的方法，将有助于实现更加具有社会影响力和情境相关性的设计。

## 关键词

自我民族志；多物种民族志；地方依恋；景观感知；故事讲述

## 文章亮点

- 研究通过自我民族志与多物种民族志探讨如何建立地方依恋
- 以故事讲述的方式将身体体验与地方依恋通过多物种纠缠联系起来
- 强调“将景观设计民族志化”以实现具有价值导向的自觉表达

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