

The Mountain Knows Who You Are

Visual Storytelling Through Autoethnography

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Abstract—This paper discusses the concept of autoethnography used in doctoral research on digital media arts, based on long-term photographic fieldwork in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. The paper argues that photographic practice and scientific inquiry are forms of knowledge production embedded in landscape and interconnected lived experiences. The mountain landscape is considered a living being by local communities. Places called 'ezuamas' function as interwoven realities that preserve memory and are sources of ancestral teaching. Human activity exists in a network connecting people with the environment and spiritual forces. Similarly, various roles, from photographer and artist to researcher, converge in the figure of the author, and ultimately motherhood fundamentally influences the course and outcome of the research. The paper also suggests possible resonances between analogue photographic processes and digital logic. Interviews with local participants revealed parallel perspectives in which technologies may be understood as manifestations of pre-existing cosmological principles. The project was divided into two phases, fieldwork and post-production. The narrative component combines analogue black-and-white photography and digital colour audiovisual material with autobiographical notes written during stays in the region between 2019 and 2022, with subsequent analytical reflections during data processing between 2022 and 2026.

Keywords—Autoethnography; Digital Media and Art; Analogue Photography; Photographic Fieldwork; Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta; Practice-Based Research

I. INTRODUCTION

Questions of perception and mediation increasingly shape contemporary artistic inquiry across visual and digital media. In this context, prolonged immersion in a specific environment can become a method that connects image-making, writing, listening, and everyday engagement into a single research trajectory. Such an approach challenges stable separations between individual forms of knowledge and raises the question of how lived experience and image mutually contribute to the formation of meaning. The article approaches study as an evolving spatial and temporal practice in which visual media are embedded in situated thinking.

II. MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF WORK

This project is anchored in the methodology of autoethnography, which allows the examination of one's own perception as a legitimate source of understanding. This approach is also framed through the concept of artistic practice as a process in which the technical aspects give way to the experience of unity between the artist and the subject.

As described in the context of the Japanese tradition of archery, true mastery of practice does not arise at the moment of technical perfection but at the moment when conscious control is relinquished and practice becomes an action that comes from a deeper level of the mind. From this angle, the subject and the artist become one rather than being in opposition to one another (Suzuki, 1992, pp. 5–6).

This study enhanced knowledge of the historical and traditional cosmological concepts of the communities transmitted by the elders. Since the author learned through speaking with the younger members of the communities that the people of the Sierra Nevada do not wish to be seen as exclusively traditional or live in isolation from society at large, rather than framing the situation as a tension between tradition and modernity, the study approached it in terms of

an open-ended methodology to resist both romanticisation and critique. Although on the one hand, there is much emphasis on a cautious decolonial approach that involves controlled sharing and contextualisation and is mainly shaped by a historical sense of obligation (Jung, 1997); by contrast, people from the communities themselves tend to step beyond clichéd taboos set by both Western discourse and community members. Conversations with members of the Sierra Nevada communities or collaborators from the region revealed a plurality of perspectives that cannot be reduced to a single narrative. The community is a constellation of individuals – for some, engagement with external education, travel, and digital technologies represent opportunities for exchange and self-representation. For others, these same processes may be associated with loss and transformation, creating imbalances, including changes in perception of reality due to learning new languages.

It became evident that while members of the communities often approached cultural ways of knowing from within their own inherited cosmological framework, the researcher discovered that in her own case subjectivity could not be avoided. This became particularly clear during the early years of motherhood and later, when a friend from the Iku community visited her in Berlin at the end of the research period. At that stage, the project was already being conducted remotely through archives, scholarly texts, and interviews with participants and collaborators.

The encounter marked a reversal of the original research situation. Instead of the researcher travelling to the Sierra Nevada to access the field, a member of the community entered the researcher's own social and domestic environment. This shift altered the perception of distance and difference on which the fieldwork had initially been structured. The distinction between 'field' and 'home', as well as between 'traditional' and 'modern', became less fixed and more relational. As a result, the inquiry gained a more reciprocal and human dimension, deepening the relationship between the researcher and the subject of the study.

The photographer enters the act, still quietly and unobtrusively, but she already sees she finds herself somewhere beyond her idea of reality, yet it is so ordinary and obvious and archetypal. Her mind is not able to grasp the established concept of time that flows here and in which she meets people that she recognises very well, yet in the depth of the soul, shaped by the overseas homeland, she has already forgotten it. The Iku people radiate something absolutely essential and well known into the space, but she cannot give it a name. Despite this, the photographer maintains a distance, almost a religious respect, bowing deeply on her knees, to a culture she does not know. She forgets about herself, her roots, and the past; she becomes invisible; she has her role here. Nevertheless, she takes photographs, but now she is not a photographer but just a camera, an eye, the lens of the device, or a frame of film onto which drops of light are dotted. (Šnajberková, 2019).

The aforementioned excerpt from the field diary illustrates a temporary dissolution of the author–subject distinction during the very first encounter with the indigenous community. Perception is embedded within the situation itself. The camera functioned as an extension of

presence, aligning with understandings of image-making as a relational act, and thus operated as a situated interface within a network of people compared to a cosmological scheme of the loom. The people of the Sierra Nevada often refer to collaboration as ‘tejer’ (to weave), further developed with a reference to the binary code originating in the Jacquard loom (Pitman, 2017).

As proximity with the subject deepened, the impulse to document was replaced by the need to preserve the integrity of the experience without mediation. Choosing not to produce an image is an epistemological stance: a refusal to overwrite lived reality.

She does not go to take the photograph. She already knows the photograph of the Kággaba men inside the cave ‘los guájaros’. The darkness is saturated with the squeaking sounds of the birds circling inside as if in a closed cardboard gift box into which light flows through the ragged bends in the corners, and men in white clothes are standing at the foot of the crevice, silently observing and stretching their necks to the ceiling of the closed convex space in the rock. The presence of humans inside the animal dwelling breathes an almost ceremonial life: the men are children inside the womb, which is also the universe. (Šnajberková, 2026).

This dynamic redefines visibility and invisibility. During fieldwork, the author was not invisible in the sense of being distant; on the contrary, she was literally asked to be actively engaged in everyday life. ‘Invisibility’ here describes those moments when the act of photographing becomes seamlessly integrated into the situation, no longer perceived as an external intervention. Between these positions—active participation, mediated observation, and deliberate non-recording—the project unfolded as a continuous and circulating negotiation of presence involving mediation between the subject, the author, and the medium itself. It supports the concept of ‘landscape’ as a field of meaning which is one of the work’s main contributions. The landscape is viewed as a living entity with memory and significance in the context of local communities. Locations known as ‘ezuamas’ function as nodes where people, nature, and spiritual forces converge. Here, relational interactions that link numerous facets of reality generate meaning.



Fig. 1. Jaroslava Šnajberková, *Kággaba*, 2021. Digitised analogue photography.

Reinterpreting analogue photography an instrument used in this research, and as a medium with a latent digital principle, is a further contribution. The testimony of spiritual authorities (Mámas) describe contemporary technologies as

manifestations of principles already present at the origin of the world (Green et al., 2022). This idea enables comparisons with local cosmologies, where modern technologies are viewed as expressions of ideas that have long existed in their conception of reality. The link between analogue and digital media rests on a shared ontological question: how does the invisible become visible—how do material and immaterial dimensions relate? In Kággaba cosmology, the concept of ‘Aluna’ refers to a pre-material realm of potentiality from which the visible world develops, in a similar way analogue photography transforms temporal and luminous events and manifests as a visible trace. Kággaba masks, as described in the Dugunawi story, function as operative devices that alter perception: when worn, they reveal dimensions of reality that remain otherwise inaccessible (Nacogui, 2025). From this point of view, both the camera and the mask can be approached as mediating boundaries between different layers of material and immaterial domains, yet interconnected.

III. CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The question of the emergence of meaning represents a key level of discussion. Theoretical approaches emphasising the role of the viewer, formulated, for example, by Roland Barthes (2005), shift interpretation of the work towards the viewer, who becomes an active creator of meaning. In other approaches, the author remains central, structuring and conveying meaning.

A focus on corporeality, everydayness, and the contextualisation of epistemology, integrating the role of technology and mediation as well, has developed in a structure of contemporary research. In dominant discourse, digital technologies are often associated with notions of novelty and discontinuity. Analogue photography in this context acts as a medium that connects the material and informational levels and allows one to consider the image as a transformative practice. By continuously tying the visual medium to long-term life engagements—including the author’s identity transformation in relation to motherhood—this work extends this paradigm. While modern scientific approaches often work with the separation of humans and nature, in the environment of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta reality is understood as an interconnected whole.

According to Ruddick’s concept of ‘maternal thinking’, knowledge is understood in relational terms, and the bond between a mother and her child is conditioned by ongoing communication and the need for authenticity and care. In fieldwork this can be manifested in having a clear goal, structure, plan, systematicity, maintaining internal strength, discipline (like people from communities) while also following unpredictable rhythms of the environment, landscape or weather. In the absence of a child, the study might have followed a more performance-orientated logic, prioritising productivity and immediate outcomes. In fact, childbearing created prolonged periods of time away from the field during maternity leave, which allowed for intuition and the organic progression of the work with greater flexibility. This approach made it clear that there is not a single, comprehensive guide or body of knowledge that does not depend on the context.

The researcher spends time by the river, sleeping on a stone in the foetal position, and the water roars beneath and through the stone. It turns into a greyscale black-and-white photograph and a mosaic of nature; it is a fluffy

foam rolling over boulders and flowing into lagoons, and the sound of the river is enclosed in the jungle, and then it falls down in a mighty waterfall along the path along which the researcher descends for a long time to the town of Palmor. (An example from the dissertation, showing how the author works with a photographic archive as a stencil for describing experience as a generative structure for narrative. The image precedes the text, shaping its rhythm and descriptive logic. Šnajberková, 2026).

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IV. CONCLUSION

The article has outlined an understanding of research as an interconnected and encompassing trajectory in which environment and mediated experience are inseparable. However, the project remains open-ended, continuing beyond the temporal and methodological frame of this paper. Future fieldwork will involve renewed engagement with the Sierra Nevada communities, now including the presence of the child, which inevitably reconfigures the conditions of perception and participation. The project thus follows an unfolding logic in which knowledge emerges through shifting relations and lived experience. This ongoing transformation resonates with the fluid nature of contemporary digital media, where boundaries between image, memory, and reality remain continuously in motion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the members of the communities in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and to all collaborators for their trust and generosity during fieldwork. The encounters and shared moments made this work possible. The author also wishes to thank her supervisors and co-authors for their guidance and sustained support throughout the development of this project. All interpretations presented in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author.

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