First published in "A Fractured North – Facing Dilemmas," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2024: 39 – 57. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

2 AGAINST "METHODOLOGICAL SOLOISM": AN ACCOUNT OF VERTIGINOUS ETHNOGRAPHY IN KOLYMA IN 2022

Asya Karaseva

I am standing in the dark kitchen in front of the window; my heart is pumping fast. The street is brightly lit. I am all ears, waiting for another series of knocks on my door. The first series catches me while I am recording a voice message to my small peer support group in a messaging app. We discussed my first interview during this fieldwork – a 3.5-hour-long conversation with a key informant that ended with him calling me by my name and patronym. I never mentioned my patronym, though. This was enough for me to experience a spasm of paranoia, to suspect him of contacting the Federal Security Service (FSB), and to expect them to come after me soon. My friends-cum-fellow anthropologists residing in different time zones around the world have just persuaded me of the high unlikeliness of my interpretation. And now – these knocks on my door. I instinctively turned off the light and now am just standing in the kitchen, trying to control my breath and hoping that lack of light in the apartment would signal to whoever is outside that I am not at home. I will gain some time to share the interview recording with my friends and then delete it from my recorder and notebook. I will gain some time to prepare for interrogation. No new series of knocks, though. I spend my evening half-listening to my obligatory course at the university nine time zones away and preparing for whoever-is-after-me's early morning visit. I wake up at 5 a.m. and am ready for the visit. Nobody comes. Around 9 a.m., I fall asleep and sleep for 12 hours.

This was the first in a series of vertiginous episodes I experienced during my fieldwork in Kolyma in November and December 2022, almost a year deep into Russia's military assault on Ukraine. In his book on vertiginous life in contemporary Greece, Daniel Knight (2021) charts "an affective structure of Time of Crisis," with nausea, disorientation, and pervasive anxiety being signs of "radical alienation from history and society" (Knight 2021: 9). Here I present an account of what doing ethnography in this state looks like in order to argue that the main part of the anthropologist's work in the world falling apart is the production of common sense – a principally collective endeavor.

While the role of emotions and affects for conducting fieldwork in politically unstable contexts or during crises is hardly a new topic in anthropology (Hage 2010; Hsu 2010; Macaspac 2019; Malmström 2019; Pollard 2009; Sluka 1990; Zadrożna 2016), their discussion in relation to the Russian North and Siberia has been notably absent. The re-opening of Siberia for international ethnographers in the tumultu-

ous 1990s brought about new theoretical approaches to the description of social and political relations in the area (Gray et al. 2003) but these studies tended to rely on a positivist epistemology which presumes a researcher to act as a neutral observer in the field. Despite some justice being done to the works of native anthropologists (cf. Balzer 1995), the postmodernist methodological reflection on scholarly positionality and its impact on gathered data in the spirit of groundbreaking "Writing Culture" (Clifford and Marcus 1986) has never taken place in Russia (cf.: Altukhova et al. 2023). Hence, this article aims to be the first to probe "radical empiricism" in the Russian North – defined as "the methodological standpoint which takes as critical those periods during fieldwork when we are not applying a self-contained method (defined as a method productive of formal interview, statistical, or inventory data)" (Davies 2010: 23) and which emphasizes the subjective aspects of anthropological knowledge production.

In what follows I first outline my positionality as a "halfie" anthropologist and what it meant for my pre-war fieldwork. Then I detail my preparations and ethical challenges for doing fieldwork in 2022. Finally, I describe the vertiginous part – occasions of mistrust between my research participants and me, as well as my tendency for hypersemiotization and sensitivity to value conflicts driven by my "halfie" position. I conclude by emphasizing the role of my peer support group and new communication technologies for managing my affects in the field and charting methodological implications of this experience for a contemporary production of anthropological knowledge.

Doing pre-war fieldwork as a "halfie" anthropologist

"Kolyma" refers to a vast area in the Kolyma River basin in Northeast Siberia but in the popular Russian discourse, it is widely associated with the territories within the present-day Magadan region and its Gulag past. The large-scale industrial development of the area began in the 1930s and until the mid-1950s heavily relied on the forced labor of prisoners under the operation of *Dal'stroi* (Far North Construction Trust). After serving their sentence, many of the prisoners left the region but camp stigma led them to keep their social networks and Kolyma identity even in other places (Pocheptsov 2015). After the dismantling of *Dal'stroi* in the late 1950s, Soviet economic policy employed a range of incentives to attract population to the North, including higher wages, longer vacations, earlier retirement, and paid vacation travel and resettlement back to *materik* after retirement (see details in: Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010). As a result of these measures, the population in the Magadan region rapidly increased, peaking at approximately 400 000 in 1989 (Wikipedia 2023). Subsequently, the number of Northerners who relocated to other locations within the Soviet Union grew.

This policy also shaped the pan-Northern identity of temporary settlers based on multiple place attachments (Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010; Liarskaya et al. 2020). Hence, the state policy of populating the area, albeit driven by different reasons in various periods, led to the formation of the translocal Kolyma community and allowed for identifying as *Kolymchanin* or *Kolymchanka* for everyone having some biographical connection to the region, regardless of their current place of residence (Karaseva 2018; cf. Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak, *this volume – eds.*).

Demographically, the population of the Magadan region mostly consists of migrants of different waves from various parts of the former Soviet Union. According to the latest census, the ethnic structure is dominated by Russians (80% of the region's population), followed by Ukrainians (approximately 2.5%). The share of Ukrainians is less than half that in the 2010 census, marking the lowest percentage in the entire history of censuses in the region (Wikipedia 2023). This implies that many people of Ukrainian origin preferred to indicate a different nationality in the census. In my interviewing experience, a significant portion of the population, particularly in the settlements deep within the region, consists of people originating from Ukraine, mostly from its Eastern parts, including post-Crimea refugees.

As a descendant of Kolyma mapmakers who came to the region in the second half of the 1940s and left it in the early 1980s, I am a "halfie" anthropologist.[1] Though I was born in Moscow, I have always felt myself as a partial "insider," a part of the widespread community of Kolyma people thanks to my father's and grandmother's vivid stories of their life in Kolyma; my Magadanian uncle's family's prolonged visits with jars of red caviar once every few years, and occasional short visits of other Magadanians who moved to Moscow; beautiful rocks and walrus tusks with depictions of the Soviet Indigenous life stored in our bookcases and cupboards; and magnificent photos of Kolyma mountainous landscapes on the walls of our apartment. Longing to find my roots and to fill gaps in my family's history — which was not without secrets — I decided to pursue my PhD project in Kolyma when the opportunity came in 2014. Consequently, I conducted several fieldwork trips, each lasting one to two months, to Magadan and the so-called Central Kolyma area, in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2020. These trips served a dual purpose: conducting research for my PhD and contributing to research projects at the Center of Arctic Social Studies at the European University at St. Petersburg, where I was a part of the research team. My fieldwork in November and December 2022 was planned as a part of a team project long before 24 February. It was supposed to provide the data for one of my thesis chapters.

1 A term coined by Kirin Narayan and popularized by Lila Abu-Lughod who initially used it to characterize "people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage" (1991:137). Later, the term was extended to other forms of in-betweenness (Rezaei 2022). However, the general idea of a combination of insider/outsider positions which makes an anthropologist accountable not only to the professional community of anthropologists but also to the people from the field, still holds.

Conducting fieldwork in Kolyma before the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was mainly a smooth experience, though it varied in different places within the region. For the most part, my research participants were open, trustful, and generous in sharing their life stories and opinions with me. Some willingly introduced me to their friends and families and invited me to their homes. Interview refusals, avoidance, or no-shows were rare occasions. The general attitude towards a stranger like me – a *Kolymchane's* descendant coming to conduct research from St. Petersburg, the prestige migration location for many Northerners (Liarskaya et al. 2020; Gavrilova 2020) – was favorable partially due to my background and partially due to the welcoming disposition to strangers often found in remote areas (Ardener 1987). In Kolyma, at the beginning of my research, this disposition was related to the perceived deficit of political, media, and research attention to this region within the country. When I started my work in the region in 2015, many of my interlocutors in the area complained about a lack of attention and awareness of their region in central Russia and particularly in Moscow, and wanted to communicate their struggles to those in power through talking to me – the attitude which starkly contrasted with my earlier fieldwork experience in the over-researched Lovozero in the Murmansk region (Karasëva 2023), where people seemed to be tired of researchers and not keen to talk.

Since circa 2019, Kolyma's place in the public attention economy in Russia has started to change. In 2018, the region was fully included in the orbit of federal politics when the new governor, a complete outsider with no prior connections to Kolyma, stepped in. For many locals, the appointment of a non-local governor marked a shift in the perception of the region by the central government ("*tsentr*") and the president, as all of the previous governors originated from Kolyma. In March 2019, the popular Russian blogger Yuri Dud', host of the interview show bearing his name, released a 3.5-hour documentary on Kolyma's Gulag history titled "Kolyma – Birthplace of Our Fear."[2] The film rediscovered the topic of Stalin's repressions for the younger generation and provoked active discussions in the Russian media. Albeit controversial among Kolyma dwellers, the documentary sparked tourist interest in the region. Around the same time, research teams from the Moscow campus of the Higher School of Economics, one of the powerhouses in Russian education in social sciences, and from the GULAG History Museum in Moscow, started to organize field expeditions to the region. These changes resulted in the shift of public attention to the region, increasing tourism and new construction projects in Magadan, which then attracted a migrant workforce from the states of Central Asia. For research work, this meant that recruiting interviewees became more difficult, since locals, especially in Magadan, gradually grew tired of strangers and were less willing to share their lives. However, before 24 February 2022, interactions with interlocutors continued, and they remained generally candid.

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=001WouI38rQ [accessed 16.02.2024]

Any fieldwork requires managing political and ideological disagreements with research participants. Mine was no exception. Many people in Kolyma, especially in the settlements located deep within the region, have supported state politics prioritizing state interests against human lives; I hold opposing views. In the city of Magadan, political and ideological standpoints have been more diverse. I managed occasional differences in political stances by downplaying them. I did not reveal my opinion and opted to listen instead of arguing – not because it was dangerous to discuss back then but because I felt the need to abide by the anthropologist's professional ethics that required being empathetic, not judgemental, and not taking sides. Thus, prior to the full-scale invasion, despite occasional hiccups and disagreements, my fieldwork experience in Kolyma was safe and secure and relied on the mutual trust I had with my research participants thanks to my halfie identity. The war has changed this.

Preparing for doing fieldwork in 2022

Before 2022, my preparations for the fieldwork were mostly technical. I made sure that the recorder and the camera worked, and that I had enough batteries and memory cards, as well as writing materials, suitable clothes, and cash. Concerning safety, I had been careless and never informed anyone of my exact location or shared the contacts of local people whom one could ask about me in case of trouble. I also used to be self-sufficient and resolved all the difficulties I encountered in the field on my own, without seeking advice from my supervisor or colleagues. I occasionally communicated to let them know that I was doing fine and to share some field observations, but did not adhere to that as a regular practice. Doing ethnographic fieldwork was a lonely business.

In 2022, war-related political rifts impaired the way I stayed in contact with people in my field research areas in between my fieldwork trips, and, as a result, I had a very vague idea about the war's effect on the region. Public opposition to the war was stifled by new laws criminalizing the use of the term "war" and by increasing threats to one's freedom. Following the adoption of these laws, the media landscape started to change quickly, at both the federal and regional levels. Comments on the social media accounts of the primary oppositional regional news source "*Ves'ma*", which previously had given me at least a partial idea about the mood on the ground, were closed for a prolonged time. When restored, the number of comments was significantly lower than before. Also, many of my friends from Magadan stopped updating their Facebook and Instagram pages once Meta was declared an extremist organization. Though I occasionally kept in touch with a few people, it was not enough to get a full picture of what one should prepare for. The heightened uncertainty created risks of its own and fed into my sense of insecurity.

However, the assessment of risks that field research invoked, both for me and my research participants, was a challenging task. One of the characteristic traits of this time of fracture was dissensus about the amount of riskiness of standard academic practices. Finishing projects which were initiated before the full-blown war during 2022 and 2023 (Karaseva 2023; Karaseva et al. 2023), I discovered a new dimension of collective work – the negotiation of dangerousness. Occasionally, I found myself in heated arguments with my closest colleagues regarding the choice of the right language for publication or the dangerousness of the very fact of academic or media publication. Some of my older colleagues who remained in Russia mocked those who had left the country for taking what they saw as excessive security measures, dismissing the perceived risks as mere "fears." These arguments revealed the lack of a common understanding of risks for researchers and research participants concerning different academic activities. Hence, the dissensus left researchers without any guidelines, including ethical ones, leading each to decide individually on conducting fieldwork – and taking unknown risks – or refraining from it. Colleagues from universities outside of Russia, whose fieldwork in the country was most affected by the war, made different decisions regarding their work, depending on their universities' different rules but also on the stage of their academic careers. Researchers who had been involved in their PhD research for an extended period continued their fieldwork in Russia, as did some postdocs with long-term experience studying the region. Senior colleagues with established positions tended to pause their projects or switch to historical topics.

Following the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, my positionality has changed. Before that, I had a long history of participating in political protests; due to this I felt at risk of possible detention under the new circumstances. Hence, I fled to Estonia, where I was granted the opportunity to continue my PhD project at the University of Tartu. At the same time, I still had commitments to my Russian colleagues within the team project, though my own fieldwork in it was planned to be a part of my PhD thesis. My research topic was not sensitive, and from those colleagues who did their fieldwork after the beginning of the full-scale war, I knew that the war affected different places in Russia very differently. I decided to proceed with fieldwork, taking additional data protection measures. Though I did my winter fieldwork as a researcher from the Russian university, I felt uneasy about not disclosing my second affiliation to my research participants. As in other examples of widening political gulfs, being silent about it paradoxically seemed more ethical since it better served the goal of not harming them; in case of trouble, all the responsibility for foreign contacts would lie solely with me.[3] However, not being able to be as open as I used to be took its toll on me.

3 Following large-scale political protests, Russia introduced the legal status of "foreign agent" in 2012, consistently expanding the category of persons and organizations covered by it in the following years. On 1 December 2022, the new edition of the law, adopted earlier this year, entered into force. The list of reasons for declaring someone a "foreign agent" was updated with the new unspecified concept of "foreign influence", making any contact with a foreigner

This time I prepared for the fieldwork in a completely new way. I studied the scholarly literature on conducting fieldwork in politically unstable and/or authoritarian contexts (Gentile 2013; Glasius et al. 2018; Sluka 1990; Yusupova 2019). I followed the advice of having trusted contacts and created a private chat group in one of the social networks with my friends-cum-fellow anthropologists where I initially intended to inform them about my location and contact information – I planned to move within the region a lot. I gave them instructions on who to contact and how to manage my affairs in case of trouble. For the first time in my professional life, I planned my fieldwork expedition as if I might not return from it. I also implemented some changes in data logging and storage. I installed special software to secure the data on my computer and sought to clean my recorder at the end of each working day. I used initials instead of the names of persons with whom I talked, in my diary and in my list of interviews, to prevent any harm in case of arrest and seizure of my materials. I chose to not focus on illegal practices in any way, by purposely deflecting or not supporting talk that went in this direction during interviews.

Thus, in 2022, my fieldwork was differentiated by a higher awareness of possible security risks than previously. However, before the expedition, I still envisaged it as a sole endeavour, intending to use my "support chat group" only for informing on my movements within the region. Using this "chat group" turned out to offer much more than that – it transformed my ethnographic practice into a collaborative effort to produce and sustain the common sense necessary to continue the work amidst mistrust and suspicion, both my own and my research participants.

Mistrustful research participants

Situated identity negotiation has always been a part of my fieldwork. Ethnographic research has remained an odd activity for locals despite my explanations. Most often, I have been mistaken for a journalist, though for a journalist, I stayed in the settlements for surprisingly long stints. One time I was mistaken for a secret inspector. In wartime, an outsider hanging around and asking questions can acquire a new, potentially dangerous identity, that of a spy. While some of my foreign colleagues have been accustomed to dealing with this framing (Dudeck 2017), for me as a halfie anthropologist it was a new experience. The Magadan region was thousands of kilometers away from the frontline and has not hosted any military industry on its territory; in the preceding years this remoteness was often seen as an advantage guaranteeing security to the people of Kolyma. The start of the full-blown war and the mobilization of men in September 2022 brought acute insecurity and alertness into Kolyma dwellers' lives, not least because many of them originated from Eastern Ukraine or had relatives in

potentially compromising.

Russian regions near the border with Ukraine. It redefined the boundaries between private and public, between what should stay hidden and what can be revealed to strangers, and added new facets to the expectations regarding the aims of outsiders with a vague agenda.

In 2022, the focus of my research was on Kolyma roads, which meant I needed to visit several settlements. To prevent possible troubles, I started my fieldwork in a settlement by informing the local administration about my research and interviewing them on the current social and economic condition of the settlement. In one of the settlements, the head of administration was absent, and the person in charge was his deputy, a woman in her early fifties, an ex-teacher and director in the local school, with Ukrainian roots. I will call her Galina.[4] She patiently answered my questions, then asked me for my papers once again and, seemingly struck by a sudden thought, invited me for lunch with her and her friend. For the time before lunch, she carefully arranged my program. I interviewed her trusted administration coworker and spent the rest of my time on a welcome tour of the recently renovated library, one of the settlement's few prides. Then I returned to the administration building and we met with Galina's friend, a much younger woman in a puffer coat. We went to the school for lunch. During small talk on our way there, Galina's friend, to whom I had not been introduced, asked me whether I knew some of the other St. Petersburg scholars who also worked in the area, and mentioned her working trip to the St. Petersburg prosecution office. When we arrived at our destination – a hidden newly refurbished teacher's room with a rotating table at the center – and took off our coats, I noticed the woman's service jacket and felt dizzy. I did not recognize the service she supposedly worked for, but these kinds of jackets are usually worn by the workers of the so-called *silovye vedomstva* (law enforcement agencies), including the police, prosecution services, FSB, investigative committees, etc. A canteen worker brought us a pot of soup and some pilaf. We sat down at the table and Galina asked me to tell them about myself and my research. When I mentioned the European University at St. Petersburg, the woman asked me directly if there was some foreign funding involved – the university's name sounded strange. I smiled and reassured them that everything was fine with the university's funding and told them about the book we had published recently (Vakhtin and Dudeck 2020) and my previous work in the Magadan region. Galina seemed satisfied and switched the topic. I passed the test. However, the facework (cf. Goffman 1967) of presenting myself as a competent, assured researcher while dealing with an anxiety attack during this lunch consumed much energy. I had to force myself to eat. I stayed alert for the rest of the day, until evening when I could share my fears with my support chat group. In response to my anxieties, my experienced friend Ksenia shared her 2015 fieldwork experience in another Northern region, stating that such questions were common there. For her, it totally made sense that Galina did not

4 I use pseudonyms for all of the people with whom I interacted, except for my colleagues, whose real names I use with their consent.

want to risk her own judgement being poor and sought the opinion of someone she trusted regarding me. Ksenia told me field stories I had never heard from her before, despite our close collaboration for years, and shared helpful tips for communicating in situations like this. This discussion via voice messages helped me to battle my fears and see the reasonable part of Galina's behavior. Basically, Galina and I acted similarly in dealing with a potentially dangerous stranger – we turned to our close contacts to frame the situation and negotiate its inherent dangers. Mutual mistrust was managed collectively.

Mistrust was not limited to the attitude toward strangers. It also came up in relationships with people I had known for a long time. On a Friday almost at the end of my fieldwork, I came to the office of a friend of mine in Magadan, Vera, and incidentally met Vadim there. He was an ex-officer in the emergency management department and a participant in one of my previous research projects several years ago. He did not recognize me. We talked about my previous and current research, and as I needed to organize an interview with officials, Vera suggested using Vadim's contacts to do that. They asked me for a document to confirm my research goals; Vadim took a photo of it and sent it to his former colleagues via WhatsApp, asking them with whom I could talk. Vadim also made some phone calls but eventually, all he gave me was an official phone number that I could have easily found on the department's website. I called the number and was advised to call again on Monday and talk to the department head. I grew anxious about letting my interlocutors in the office share the document I had provided to them: who would see it and what might be the consequences for me?

The next day Vera, our common friend Kirill, and I drove to a city festival together. On our way back, Vera stopped to buy something at a store, and while we were waiting for her, Kirill turned to me and dropped a series of questions obviously related to my communication with Vera and Vadim the previous day: "So, how did it go with this office? It did not work out, heh? You are considered a foreign agent, aren't you? Did you encounter any problems in the settlements?" My heart sank. These questions revealed that there had been a vivid discussion of my affiliation behind my back. I smiled reassuringly, though, and shared with him a story of Galina and her friend's testing me. We discussed the service jacket of Galina's friend, he hypothesized that the woman could work for the FSB and told me some stories of interrogation by the service of foreigners or Russians working for foreign media who were forced to leave the region without doing their work. I felt sick. Vera returned to the car, and we changed the topic. Together we visited a small fancy market event where neither of them introduced me to their friends and acquaintances. Severely struck by an anxiety attack, I was barely able to do the facework and was grateful for not being forced to do more of that by presenting myself and explaining anything about my research. After visiting the event, we drove to my home. Vera began a new round of discussion about my research and asked me if I was interested in talking with a person from the city's tourist industry. I expressed my interest, and she started inquiring about the European

University at St. Petersburg so she could introduce me to this person: Why does the university have this strange name? What stages of education does it provide? What are the programs there? It already felt like a gentle interrogation – surprisingly, by someone who had known me for six years and whom I considered to be a friend. But did we actually know each other, after all?

The panic attack became full-blown when I finally was alone at home. I felt tempted to change my tickets and leave Magadan right away, without even trying to reach the department head on Monday, especially since the literature on doing fieldwork in dangerous locations recommended doing that in case of trouble. I recorded a voice message about my fears to the chat group. This time, my other friend Svetlana quickly responded, agreeing that Vadim's circulation of my support letter via WhatsApp among unknown people, as well as the fuss around my affiliation, was a valid reason for being nervous. However, she pointed out that if there had been a real threat, Kirill wouldn't discuss "foreign agents" issues with me. She also reminded me of the fears, paranoia, and desire to prevent potential dangers that my informants might have in current circumstances. Ksenia emphasized that my research was legal, and therefore, the likelihood of facing interrogation solely based on the document Vadim shared with his anonymous acquaintances was low. A third friend, Stephan, checked on what could be found about me on the Internet. We ended by reflecting on the gendered dimensions of mistrust. While none of them provided specific advice on whether to stay until the planned date of departure or leave immediately, the collective brainstorming, diverse opinions about the situation, and the empathy my friends expressed for me gave me a sense of grounding and empowered me to pursue the interview that I needed with the department staff.

These two examples demonstrate the risks of mistrust with both new and established acquaintances that caused vertiginous moments in me. However, no single expression of mistrust felt dangerous. Some revealed that mistrust of strangers is not typical and should be mastered in the new geopolitical conditions. In a settlement far away from Magadan, I interviewed Alexei, an ex-geologist in his 60s who taught extracurricular classes at the local school. He originated from Ukraine and was a fierce supporter of the war – a stance that made me very uneasy until he mentioned his genuine fear of the FSB potentially approaching him. The interview spanned several days because he had difficulty concentrating on anything other than his passion, which was unrelated to the subject of my research. Occasionally, I had to guide the conversation back to the main topic of our discussion. We talked for hours over several consecutive days. While I explained the project in detail at the beginning of our interview on the first day, he asked me about the project and the university once again on our last evening. Forgetting details about my research and affiliation, as he did, was something I had grown accustomed to from my previous expeditions. Generally, my research participants were satisfied with having a broad understanding that I was from St. Petersburg and conducting research. In an apologetic tone, Alexei explained

that his wife had wondered who I was and why we talked so much and he found it difficult to answer her questions. Like others, he commented about the word "European" in the university's name but his attitude felt different. After talking to me for a few evenings, he clearly did not have any mistrust of me and just wanted to reassure his wife that I posed no danger. It seemed to be a new experience for him to contemplate the possible motives of a conversation partner he did not know well and to be suspicious about interactions with strangers. He was learning to mistrust, and this process was collective, similar to the previous cases of Galina and Vera managing their mistrust.

Thus, under the conditions of war, the situational identity negotiation for a stranger in Kolyma has become more complicated and risk-burdened than before. While a social researcher has always been seen as a somewhat enigmatic figure in Kolyma, the war made it important for locals to identify me as someone working on the "right side" and being sanctioned by the state, as exemplified by the attention given to the title of the European University at St. Petersburg. Galina's invitation of the woman in the state service jacket, who was not introduced, to our lunch can be read as an involvement of the state in the process of identification. Vera's desire to ensure that I was not a foreign agent indicated her tendency to prioritize the state's definition over her personal long-term knowledge of me. In the new circumstances, unambiguous state approval has become a prerequisite for successful fieldwork, and a lack of trust set in motion a collective negotiation of my identity. As I have shown, the management of mistrust was a social process and, for certain individuals such as Alexei, included learning not to trust as much as they used to. This process also had a gender dimension: in my experience, women tended to express mistrust to me more openly than men.

Anthropologist in vertigo

Not only were my research participants suspicious but so was I. At times, the slightest deviation from my expectations was enough to trigger a bout of paranoia, as described in the vignette at the beginning of this article. In their book on the Soviet folklore around daily things, Alexandra Arkhipova and Anna Kirziuk describe "hypersemitiozation" – a process of assignment of harmful meaning to arbitrary signs and harmful intentions to addressees of these signs. They provide examples such as seeing a counterrevolutionary motto in the drawing on the cover of a school notebook or a *swastika* in a sausage cut (Arkhipova and Kirzyuk 2019: 104–108). Hypersemiotization flourishes in contexts dominated by entrenched political or religious ideology and a high sense of danger and loss of control. An entrenched ideology creates a sense of total meaningfulness in the world, provoking one to find meaning everywhere, while an inability to maintain control allows for the construction of an enemy. An exemplary instance of such a context is found in the era of the Great Terror.

Contemporary Russia possesses both core traits of a hypersemiotization-favorable context. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, anti-Western ideology, which Putin's elites had slowly started to build much earlier (Evans 2015), broke new ground as any open opposition to it became *de facto* criminalized. Selective law enforcement (Bækken 2020), targeted repressions (Gel'man 2016), increasing use of complex language in law (Knutov et al. 2020), and subsequent counterfeiting of legality (Rigi 2012) point to a Putin's strategy of government by creating uncertainty. The amalgamation of reinforced ideology and the increased deployment of politics of uncertainty create an environment conducive to the perception of loss of control and enemy tracking. First evidence of hypersemiotization concerning the colors of the Ukrainian flag emerged as early as 2014 when the combination of yellow and blue in everyday settings, such as playgrounds or street markings, had begun to be interpreted as a subtle political message supporting Ukraine (Volkova 2016).

While Arkhipova and Kirziuk (2019) focus on seeking signs in material objects, I find their approach useful to analyze my own reactions in the field. In the first vignette, I described my panic attack following my interviewee accidently revealing knowledge about me that I hadn't provided. Back then I assumed that the only motive for him to possess this knowledge was related to state interest. The ideology guiding my interpretation, in this case, was a standard liberal one – about an almighty and omnipresent state hunting down its opponents. The level of uncertainty, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, was also higher as prior to starting the trip I did not have enough insights into the local life to get a general idea of what I should prepare for. These circumstances, coupled with my fear of imprisonment, caused me to imbue minor breaches of my expectations with far-reaching meaning. Understanding my own tendency to hypersemiotize helped me to find a way of dealing with it. As did some of Volkova's (2016) research participants, I kept in mind the possibilities of both political and non-political reading of everyday situations despite the vertiginous effects of hypersemiotization. The solution was not to act upon my suspicion until doing a "reality check" with my trusted partners, who included not only the support chat group but occasionally also other close colleagues.

Vertigo episodes were not limited to potentially dangerous and hypersemiotization-driven occasions. Political and ideological disagreements with my research participants emerged as some of the most potent triggers for my vertigo seizures. As I mentioned before, managing value conflicts was the main difficulty I encountered in my fieldwork in Kolyma prior to the full-scale invasion. Under wartime conditions, openly expressing political disagreement became risky. At the same time, as a citizen, I found my previous strategy of downplaying such disagreements morally dubious. This combination of heightened risk and increasing perceived ethical obligation to disagree openly created the perfect condition for repetitive vertigo episodes.

Moreover, the opportunities to experience value conflicts widened as after February 24th official ideology permeated education and culture – the local institutions that

are usually most open for an anthropologist. In schools, a new ritual was introduced on Monday mornings, involving a flag-raising ceremony and playing the national anthem, followed by a new extracurricular subject, "Conversations about Important Things," designed to disseminate state vision of internal and foreign politics. Local houses of culture, centers of extracurricular education and libraries were also expected to incorporate patriotic content. Visiting these institutions meant coming into direct contact with the official ideology and its conductors, some of whom were politically indifferent but talented, others alarmingly devoted to performing the state's mission, and still others striving to keep within the required minimum limits. As a result, the amount of patriotic content varied significantly among institutions.

Attending school tours or cultural events was often fraught with occasional strokes of terror and nausea. I particularly recall two episodes. One took place during a cultural performance at one settlement's house of culture. A very talented and energetic young director staged a vibrant show praising Russians as hosts for all other ethnic groups in Kolyma, while an Indigenous family just several meters away from me watched it, their faces impenetrable. Their children took part in the show on par with other "guests." My knowledge of the history of Russian colonization in Siberia, coupled with sketchy observations of mistreatment of Indigenous persons in this particular place, made me susceptible to the ideology behind this presentation, especially given how well it was performed. The other episode occurred during a school tour. The already mentioned Galina, serving as my tour guide, led me through a school. She halted on the ground floor, near the flagpoles, scrutinized the flags, and initiated a discussion with one of the accompanying teachers about the Monday flag-raising ceremonies and policies to motivate children not to be late for them. The teacher appeared scared and tried to convey that incidents of tardiness were rare and exceptional occasions. I felt sympathetic toward the teacher, who seemed unprepared for this display of national patriotism and local power, and painfully awkward about myself as I, this time perceived as an auditor of sorts, was the reason for this performance. Milder bouts of nausea occured at almost every encounter with some form of state praising, even when I understood that sometimes they were employed not because of ideological solidarity with the state politics but for the sake of ensuring security from its dangerous attention. During wartime, political disagreements existed not only between me and some of my research participants but also between my different identities as a researcher and a citizen. As a result, value conflicts took on a new quality, becoming viscerally intolerable.

Thus, as the war deepened the nation's political divide, being a halfie anthropologist acquired new dimensions by juxtaposing my professional and civic identities. Managing this embodied identity conflict involved increased facework and emotional labor during fieldwork compared to the pre-war times, even in non-dangerous situations.

Conclusion

In his book on vertigonous life in austerity-stricken Greece, Daniel Knight points to the affective and embodied dimensions of the time of crisis, such as nausea, vertigo, disorientation and anxiety, and interprets them as signs of "radical alienation from history and society" – a description applicable to a state at war as well. His approach is valuable for the phenomenological insights it provides into positionality in crises. Citizen anthropologists, including halfies, have always faced a dilemma of "'cross cutting ties' arising from [their] own social commitment to the system [they are] studying" (Cheater 1987:166). However, during deepening political conflicts, the stakes at this position presumably become higher. Fieldwork in times of crisis is emotionally charged, much like the environment where it is conducted: scholars working in politically unstable contexts have noted the contagiousness of fear, suspicion, and paranoia (Glasius et al. 2018; Malmström 2019; Taussig 2003).

The Russian North presents a rare context of a gradual change from the previous heartfelt openness to mistrust and suspicion under the conditions of war. Despite being far beyond the frontlines, it is still heavily affected by the Russian war in Ukraine due to both the politics of military recruitment targeting poor or remote areas (Bessudnov 2023) and the demographic composition of the population in the North, where people originating from or having close connections to Ukraine make up a significant part of the population. The efforts some informants invested in negotiating my identity and the labor I put into managing my hypersemiotization and identity conflicts during my latest fieldwork reveal the processual nature of constructing shared reality between an ethnographer and her research participants. This shift became tangible under the new circumstances marked by increasing political uncertainty and the irrelevance of previous common sense – a shared premise of a stranger co-citizen being a safe conversation partner. It also exemplifies the actual social production of common sense, which is essential for navigating everyday life (Geertz 1975), as demonstrated by the engagement of people – both by my informants and me – in making sense of various communicative situations. I also identify the role of instant communication technologies in the extension of these sense-making social networks far beyond the fieldwork location. If conducting ethnography in a state of terror is productive of anything, it is this insight into the considerable collective effort to manage growing fear of undefined enemy and produce normality in a world falling apart.

Most importantly, this exercise in "radical empiricism" highlights the fallacy of what I term "methodological soloism" in anthropology – a tendency to write ethnographies that portray an anthropologist as if they were producing their interpretations alone. This approach obscures the sociality involved in anthropological knowledge production beyond research participants. Some of the most obvious examples of such shadowed co-producers of knowledge include co-researchers in collective exped-

itions (e.g. Zadrożna 2016) or supervisors (e.g. Pollard 2009). The introduction of instant communication technologies has changed our professional practice not only by presenting the opportunity of practicing ethnography in virtual space but also in our communications with each other during the "classic" ethnographic fieldwork in distant places. It raises new questions about how to address and reveal these contributions in ethnographic writing, making it commensurable to its production conditions.

Acknowledgements

I extend my gratitude to my virtual co-fieldworkers – Ksenia Gavrilova, Svetlana Tambovtseva, Stephan Dudeck, Valeria Vasilyeva, and Elena Liarskaya – for their timely and wise advice and prompt support. I am also thankful to my informants for generously sharing their time and choosing to trust me. Special thanks to the European University at St. Petersburg, and personally Nikolai Vakhtin, for their assistance in organizing this fieldwork. Lastly, I would like to express my appreciation to Art Leete and Joachim Otto Habeck for providing me with the opportunity to continue my work in a safe environment. The work on this article was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant nr PRG1584.

References

Abu-Lughod, Lila 1991. Writing Against Culture. In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. R.G. Fox (ed.), 137–162. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Altukhova, Anna, Alexandra Martynenko, Stepan Petryakov, and Ekaterina Khonineva 2023. *Call for Papers. Konferentsiia "Zerkalo dlia antropologa? Granitsy i perspektivy kriticheskoi refleksii v rossiiskikh etnograficheskikh traditsiiakh"* [Call for Papers. Conference "A Mirror for the Anthropologist? Boundaries and Prospects of Critical Reflexivity in Russian ethnographic traditions"]. European University at St. Petersburg. 22 February 2023. https://eusp.org/news/call-for-papers-zerkalo-dlya-antropologa-granicy-i-perspektivy-kriticheskoy-refleksii-v-rossiyskikh-etnograficheskikh-tradiciyakh [accessed 16.02.2024]

Ardener, Edwin 1987. "Remote Areas:" Some Theoretical Considerations. In *Anthropology at Home*. A. Jackson (ed.), 38–54. London and New York: Tavistock Publications.

Arkhipova, Alexandra, and Anna Kirzyuk 2019. *Opasnye Sovetskie veshchi: Gorodskie legendy i strakhi v SSSR* [Dangerous Soviet Things: Urban Legends and Fears in the USSR]. Kul'tura povsednevnosti. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie.

Bækken, Håvard 2020. *Law and Power in Russia: Making Sense of Quasi-Legal Practices.* Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series 88. London and New York: Routledge.

Balzer, Marjorie Mandelstam (ed.) 1995. *Culture Incarnate: Native Anthropology from Russia*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe.

Bessudnov, Alexey 2023. Ethnic and Regional Inequalities in Russian Military Fatalities in Ukraine: Preliminary Findings from Crowdsourced Data. *Demographic Research* 48 (June): 883–898. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2023.48.31.

Cheater, A. P. 1987. The Anthropologist as Citizen: The Diffracted Self? In *Anthropology at Home*, A. Jackson (ed.), 164–79. London and New York: Tavistock Publications.

Clifford, James and George E. Marcus 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California press.

Davies, James 2010. Introduction: Emotions in the Field. In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*. J. Davies and D. Spencer (eds.), 1–31. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Dudeck, Stephan 2017. "Shpion ili ziat?" – Kak mozhno izuchat' to, chto olenevody ne khotiat raskryvat' vsem? [Spy or son-in-law? — How can one study what the reindeer herders do not want to reveal to everyone?]. In *Pole kak Zhizn: K 60-letiu Severnoi ekspeditsii IEA RAN* [The field as life: Toward the 60th anniversary of the Northern Expedition of IEA RAS]. E. A. Pivneva (ed.), 259–271. Moscow and St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia.

Evans, Alfred 2015. Ideological Change under Vladimir Putin in the Perspective of Social Identity Theory. *Demokratizatsiia: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 23(4): 401–426.

Gavrilova, Ksenia 2020. Kreativnaia Kamchatka: Zhiznennye Stsenarii "aktivnoi" molodezhi i razvitie mesta [Creative Kamchatka: Life scenarios of "active" youth and place development]. In "*Deti devianostykh*" *v sovremennoi Rossiiskoi Arktike* ["Children of the Nineties" in the Contemporary Russian Arctic]. N. Vakhtin and S. Dudeck (eds.), 188–268. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge.

Geertz, Clifford 1975. Common Sense as a Cultural System. T*he Antioch Review* 33 (1): 5–26.

Gel'man, Vladimir 2016. The Politics of Fear: How Russia's Rulers Counter Their Rivals. *Russian Politics* 1(1): 27–45. https://doi.org/10.1163/24518921-00101002.

Gentile, Michael 2013. Meeting the "Organs:" The Tacit Dilemma of Field Research in Authoritarian States. *Area* 45(4): 426–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12030.

Glasius, Marlies, Meta De Lange, Jos Bartman, Emanuela Dalmasso, Aofei Lv, Adele Del Sordi, Marcus Michaelsen, and Kris Ruijgrok 2018. Mental Impact. In *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*. M. Glasius, M. De Lange, J. Bartman, E. Dalmasso, A. Lv, A. Del Sordi, M. Michaelsen, and K. Ruijgrok (eds.),

77–95. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68966-1.

Glasius, Marlies, Meta de Lange, Jos Bartman, Emanuela Dalmasso, Aofei Lv, Adele Del Sordi, Marcus Michaelsen, and Kris Ruijgrok (eds.) 2018. *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68966-1.

Goffman, Erving 1967. On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction. In *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior.* E. Goffman (ed.), 5–45. Garden, New York: Doubleday and Co.

Gray, Patty, Nikolai Vakhtin, and Peter Schweitzer 2003. Who Owns Siberian Ethnography?: A Critical Assessment of a Re-Internationalized Field. *Sibirica* 3(2): 194–216. https://doi.org/10.1080/13617360420000245312.

Hage, Ghassan 2010. Hating Israel in the Field: On Ethnography and Political Emotions. In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience.* J. Davies and D. Spencer (eds.), 129–54. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hsu, Elisabeth 2010. Tian'anmen in Yunnan: Emotions in the Field during a Political Crisis. In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience.* J. Davies and D. Spencer (eds.), 155–70. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Karaseva, Asya 2018. Translokal'nyi Magadan: "Virtual'noe Sosedstvo" v VK-Pablike "MGDN|Magadan" [Translocal Magadan: "Virtual Neighborhood" in the VKontakte Group "MGDN|Magadan"]. In T*he Internet beyond the Numbers*. Conference proceedings. E. Bel'skaya, A. Borodulina, A. Gersimova, K. Glazkov, O. Dorofeeva, A. Karaseva, D. Koroleva, et al. (eds.), 51–64. Yekaterinburg: Ridero. https://books.google.ru/books?hl=en&lr=&id=dwBPDwAAQBAJ.

— 2023. Spasaniye v kholodnykh vodakh: Ekspertnye narrativy ob organizatsii spasaniia i spaseniia na Sevmorputi [Rescue in cold waters: Expert narratives on the organization of rescue and salvage on the Northern Sea Route]. In *Severnye morskie puti Rossii* [Russia's Northern Sea Routes]. V. Vasilyeva and K. Gavrilova (eds.), 548–83. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie.

Karasëva, Asya 2023. La représentation de l'identité culturelle des Sames et des Komis de l'Ižma à Lovozero (sur la base d'un terrain de 2011). Translated by Eva Toulouze. *Études finno-ougriennes* 55 (December): 43–83.

Karaseva, Asya, Ksenia Gavrilova, Valeria Vasilyeva, and Elena Veretennik 2023. E-Procurement and Arctic Infrastructural Geography: Challenges of e-Governance in the Russian Arctic. *Polar Geography* 46(2–3): 120–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2023.2238795.

Khlinovskaya Rockhill, Elena 2010. Living in Two Places: Permanent Transiency in the Magadan Region. *Arctic Anthropology* 8(2): 43–61.

Knight, Daniel M. 2021. V*ertiginous Life: An Anthropology of Time and the Unforeseen.*

New Anthropologies of Europe. New York: Berghahn.

Knutov, Alexandr, Sergei Plaksin, Nataliya Grigoryeva, Ruslan Sinyatullin, Alexandr Chaplinskiy, and Anna Uspenskaya 2020. *Slozhnost' rossiiskikh zakonov. Opyt sintaksicheskogo analiza* [The complexity of Russian laws. Study of syntactic analysis]. Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom vysshei shkoly ekonomiki. https://doi.org/10.17323/978-5-7598-2174-8.

Liarskaya, Elena, Valeria Vasilyeva, and Asya Karaseva 2020. Uekhat' i ostat'sia: Sotsial'naia mekhanika severnykh migratsii [Leave and stay: Social mechanics of northern migrations]. In "*Deti devianostykh*" *v sovremennoi Rossiiskoi Arktike* ["Children of the Nineties" in the Contemporary Russian Arctic]. N. Vakhtin and S. Dudeck (eds.), 79–138. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge.

Macaspac, Nerve Valerio 2019. Suspicion and Ethnographic Peace Research (Notes from a Local Researcher). In *Engaging Ethnographic Peace Research.* G. Millar (ed.), 81–96. London and New York: Routledge.

Malmström, Maria Frederika 2019. Infused with Suspicion: The Transformation of the Anthropologist Body. A*nthropology Now* 11(1–2): 116–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2019.1648126.

Pocheptsov, Vyacheslav 2015. "Kolymskoye zemlyachestvo:" Problema formirovaniia identichnosti politicheskikh zakliuchennykh (Na materiale memuarov Zoi Dmitrievny Marchenko) ["Kolyma Fraternity": The Problem of Social Identity of Political Detainees (Based on the Memoirs of Zoia Marchenko)]. *Laboratorium* 7(1): 136–146.

Pollard, Amy 2009. Field of Screams: Difficulty and Ethnographic Fieldwork. *Anthropology Matters* 11(2): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.22582/am.v11i2.10.

Rezaei, Afsane 2022. The Halfie Predicament in the Ethnography of Religion: Fieldwork with Iranian-Americana Muslim Women in Los Angeles. *Ethnography (*September): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381221111683.

Rigi, Jakob 2012. The Corrupt State of Exception: Agamben in the Light of Putin. *Social Analysis* 56(3): 69–88. https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2012.560305.

Sluka, Jeffrey 1990. Participant Observation in Violent Social Contexts. *Human Organization* 49(2): 114–26. https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.49.2.h033174683462676.

Taussig, Michael T. 2003. *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia*. New York: The New press.

Vakhtin, Nikolai and Stephan Dudeck (eds.) 2020. "*Deti devianostykh*" *v sovremennoi Rossiiskoi Arktike* ["Children of the Nineties" in the Contemporary Russian Arctic]. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge.

Volkova, Maria 2016. "Ya vezde vizhu Ukrainskiye flagi:" Neverbal'nyi kod i igrovaia forma soprotivleniia ["I See Ukrainian flags everywhere:" Nonverbal code and the playful form of resistance]. In *Gorodskie teksty i praktiki* [City Texts and Practices]. In *Simvolicheskoe soprotivlenie* [Symbolic resistance]. A. Arkhipova, D. Rad-

chenko, and A. Titkov (eds.), 85–95. Moscow: Delo.

Yusupova, Guzel 2019. Exploring Sensitive Topics in an Authoritarian Context: An Insider Perspective. *Social Science Quarterly* 100(4): 1459–1478. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12642.

Zadrożna, Anna 2016. What Are You Really Looking for? Ethnography While (Feeling) under Surveillance. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 141(2): 215–232.