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12 SUSTAINING RELATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CO-CREATING WITH PARTNERS IN SIBERIA

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Introduction

As the previous volumes in this series show, Siberia as a field for anthropological research in partnership between western and local scholars is to some extent even more closed than in the worst stretches of the Cold War. Not only has this situation arisen because of security concerns for westerners entering Russia under the current regime. In Finland, and elsewhere, it is forbidden to spend money on persons connected to a Russian organisation (Allemann 2024). Working on joint research projects with Russian partners is forbidden from the Finnish side, as is travel there as an employee of a Finnish organization. While the majority of society supports this approach, scientists have expressed concerns about the damage to science from such bans. Some colleagues have highlighted the asymmetry between strict bans to scientific cooperation on the one hand, and continued trade and other relations on the other (Allemann 2024; Rees, Büntgen, and Stenseth 2023). In Finland, with its 1340 km shared border with Russia, this contrast is particularly apparent. This border has been closed for people since late 2023, but goods continue to flow: between January and June 2024 almost 20 000 rail carriages with fertilisers from Russia entered the EU over the Finnish border.[1] The fertilisers come from the Murmansk region, produced by companies that are among Russia's leading tax payers. These imports starkly contrast with the borders closed for ordinary travel, and with the spending ban that has halted any official continuation of western research in Russia.

In this chapter we explore how our relations as anthropologists to our research partners in the field in Siberia can continue in spite of such restrictions. While the border is impermeable currently for people, not only do goods flow, but relations persist. We offer examples of sustaining relations over 2.5 years of war. Our report shall show how passionate researchers do not "switch off" for political reasons. Relations with field partners are significant for senses of belonging, personhood and professional identities of researchers. They are ready to spend significant amounts of their free time, as well as their own finances, for sustaining such relations. For some even

1 According to Finnish state news YLE https://yle.fi/a/74-20107267, 26 August 2024. [accessed 10.12.2024]

physical travel to the field sites continues to this day, even though not in the name and on the funds of their employers. Our examples of such sustained relations include three approaches: 1) communication through social media and phone, 2) co-creation of data and its remote digital transfer, and 3) physical meetings in third countries, in this case Turkey and China. These practices helped sustain relations with field partners from two areas in Siberia – Yamal and Yakutia.

With these examples we argue that the increased difficulties of in-person meetings encourage us to re-think co-creation methods with our partners, and explore opportunities of remote co-creation, as well as experiencing their limits. We show where in-person meetings are indispensable, and how they can be integrated in a multiplicity of co-creation methods between western researchers and Indigenous Siberians.

Positionality, power and asymmetry in research partnerships

This chapter focuses on relations between anthropology professors and animal herders. This is different from scholarly relations between western and Siberian colleagues. The partnerships we present here are not partnerships of equals: The inequality lies in the difference in everyday way of life as well as in social status assigned by outside societies. In our case, the relations combine personal friendships alongside anthropological co-creation. In the lived experience of the contacts we meet our partners on more equal ground: the diversity of life-orientation on both sides – academic scholarship on one, and human-animal practitioner on the other – does in our view not involve a hierarchy. Each side acknowledges and values the expertise of the other in their specific field, which contributes invaluably to the collaboration. Often, however, it seems the researcher needs the field partners more than the other way around. While the practitioners – reindeer herders – can continue their livelihood with or without the scholarly partners, the scholars need updates and new material, without which their research would come to an end. Thus, as researchers we depend more on our partners than they do on us.

Our Siberian partners live in small villages or entirely in the taiga / tundra, where they have little or no access to, nor ambition for, information on the political situation other than that provided by Russian state media. However, geographically as well as ethnically and mentally these people are as far away from the war as any sedentary resident could imagine: they are neither ethnic Russians, nor politically active, nor do they have connections to the conflicting parties. The only possible connection is that they know people who serve in the war. In our conversations we have heard how some of our partners identify more with their region or ethnic belonging than with the country of which they are citizens. This has made us reflect on our choice of terms and identification more carefully, encouraging us to refer to our field sites not as the Russian Arctic but rather Siberia, and the people there as Siberians, or more

specifically Nenets, Sakha, Evenki. This emphasizes the sense of belonging and identity beyond one's citizenship, which can intensify when the identification with one's country becomes more problematic.

Relations in theory and method of the research

The topical orientation of this chapter both ethnographically and theoretically is on relations – the social interpersonal relations that anthropologists usually talk about, centred on but not limited to human persons (Strathern 2020: 11). For decades we have carried out fieldwork on the social and cultural aspects of human-animal relations, mostly with reindeer, among people who interact daily with these animals in their herding livelihood, both in Yamal and Yakutia. A different level of relations forms the focus of this chapter: what are the challenges and opportunities of sustaining relations between scholars and field partners in difficult times? Both of these different facets of relations (human-animal relations, and researcher-field partner relations) have insights to offer as contributions to an anthropological theory of relations. Anthropology as a discipline that relies on fieldwork with people as its primary source of inspiration, method and data is therefore necessarily about relations – implicitly or explicitly.

Anthropologists have brought relations to the forefront, calling them the master concept of the discipline (Viveiros de Castro 2014; Strathern 2020; Arctic anthropology research team 2023). Marilyn Strathern has emphasized the link between relations and connections. In her work, connection has as its antithesis disconnection, while for relation "the concept is not easily defined in antithesis" (Strathern 2020: 110). The interplay between relation and connection, disconnection and re-connection guides our anthropological enquiry in this chapter. Connections can be disconnected – but can relations be dis-related? Strathern's thought proceeds with Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen (2017) in a different direction, to post-relations. Relations can come to an end. This process may be described as what Strathern has called "a 'post-relational' shift" (citing Holbraad and Pedersen) – which is what is supposed to have happened to our relations with Siberian research partners. according to the official research policy guidelines in our countries of employment after 2022.

Instead, we start theoretically with Piers Vitebsky's chapter in *Returns to the Field* (Vitebsky 2012) on the importance of repeated returns. Vitebsky shows how this kind of fieldwork-based anthropology is about the friendship of the researcher with his practitioner-partners sustained through more or less regular visits. Some of our field relations are even passed down to the next generation: in Vitebsky's case, the author returned after a long break to the Sora in India, where the children of his field partners had "inherited" the friendship with the researcher from their parents. Similar processes happened to us in Yamal and Yakutia, where we had been working since the mid 1990s and early 2000s respectively. One of the projects we report on here

focuses on this generational change. The main relation between the practitioners and the researchers has shifted to the grandchildren of a reindeer herder who was an intial key collaborator.

These relations could be sustained not only through repeated returns to the field, but also visits of the field partners to the home of the researchers. Over a decade ago the gradual increase in living standards in Siberia levelled out the material inequality of the relations, enabling the Siberian side to travel to northern Europe using their own funds, just as the European side also financed their part of the fieldwork in Siberia (Fox et al. 2025). This material balance contributed to establishing the collaboration on a firmer ground.

In many social sciences the interview is considered a main (if not the principal) method of data collection, including during fieldwork, even though we do not always consider the implications of this methodological choice (Briggs 2007). However, the connection established with the interview does not necessarily lead to a deeper relation between the interviewer and the interviewed. Many interviews have an impersonal character, and may not be followed up by repeated encounters. Such fieldwork may not involve participant observation in the classical anthropological sense. Relations do not need to be sustained in such research. This results in certain kinds of data, which are not more or less valuable in research, but are different (e.g. Takakura et al. 2024): they can be a stock-taking of a situation and produce data that lends itself to theoretical analysis by an anthropologist. In our case fieldwork required much more than interviews and led to generation-spanning relations, which produce a different kind of results, which we would not even call data: the outcome is co-created evidence of what it means to be human, to live in relation with humans, and all other beings in the environment.

In such fieldwork, we become involved in our field partners' everyday life with our entire personality, as researchers and persons, using our body, mind and soul in combination. In the interview language, mind and thought are the main tools required on both sides of the relation. Our approach involves people's personalities as a whole. We aim at learning to a modest extent some of the skills required for our partners' livelihood, for example, for reindeer herding. This is formative for the quality of the relation, as the field partners see the researcher regardless of the intellectual capacity as helpless and skill-less in practices that they have mastered. This partially evens out the inequality of status and power in the relation.

In the cases discussed below, the relations started through such processes of researchers learning from practitioners, then changed through multiple returns over many years; in a third step they developed into visits to both the field partners' home and the researchers' home, prior to 2022. How can such relations be sustained when some higher power curtails the connection? One of the numerous differences of the current situation to that of the 20th century is the presence of remote and mobile communication technology that makes crossing borders and meeting remotely much

easier, and closing borders completely much harder. Consequently, sustaining our relations with approaches subsumed under the term *netnography* became an option.

Recently, this remote research approach has evolved almost as fast as technology itself. In comparison to its longer established sister-methods of virtual and digital ethnography, netnography is characterised by guidelines on how to better understand the changing technological realities and their cultural implications among our research partners (Kozinets and Gretzel 2024). Netnography is considered "a tool for cultural understanding that leverages digital communication, but it can be used to study almost any topic, as long as it can be explored through digital traces, online events, or immersive opportunities" (Kozinets and Gretzel 2024: 2). These authors emphasize the potential of netnography for conveying experiences remotely (ibid). This experiential aspect has made it interesting for application in our relation with friends from Yamal, where the smartphone had become an everyday companion in the nomadic livelihood of the grandchildren of our initial partners (Stammler 2009).

Ethnography of sustained relations

What follows is an analysis of attempts to sustain relations with key field partners since 2022 using different methods including but not limited to netnography. We consider both the opportunities and limits of remote relations and compare them with personal meetings, which after 2022 happened in third countries outside Russia.

Case 1: Yamal

One author (Stammler) met the family of reindeer herders in 1998, and had since visited them almost yearly up to 2022. Several family members also had visited Stammler in Finland. In spring / summer 2020 this family hosted first both authors, then Stammler alone in the tundra, when the Covid-19 lockdown prohibited travel to Finland. Stammler was stuck in Siberia for five months. At that time the authors had just finished working on a Finnish-Russian co-funded project on Arctic Youth (Stammler and Toivanen 2022; Ivanova et al. 2022), hence interest in young people's issues was high. Jointly with a film maker from the UK, who had met this family first in 2006, the idea came to portray the process of growing-up and making life choices among nomadic youth, based on this family. The Covid 19-induced fieldwork in summer 2020 allowed for casting the best suitable candidates for this filming project. Two cousins, a boy and a girl, became the main characters through which the film would tell the story of generational succession and life-choices in this dynasty of nomadic reindeer herders. Since Nenets reindeer herders are one of the few societies that are fully nomadic in the 21st century, a topic like this can be explored hardly anywhere else. Yet the topic of intergenerational relations, growing up and making life-choices

during adolescence is common to all humans on the planet. The portfolio of choices may be different here, because one principal life-choice is to lead a nomadic or a sedentary way of life.

The first visit of a professional film crew happened during the New Year's holiday 2021/2022, during which we joined the family both in the tundra and their village home. Together we watched the Russian President's New Year's speech, and none of us thought that the upcoming year would mark the end of face-to-face visits. Besides filming, the first goal of this visit was the settling of all financial and ethical issues in this multi-year project and the drafting of a contract of terms and conditions. The decade-long relations between the researcher and the family were thus formalised in written form for a particular purpose – the film. All participants – the family, the researcher and the film team – were enthusiastic about the idea of true co-creation, so that the family co-owns and co-steers the agenda on equal terms alongside the researcher and the film professionals.

In the spirit of this co-creation, the film director implemented an idea that became the basis for our application of netnography during the later stage of the project: after agreeing with the parents, the main young family member got a state-of-the-art smartphone as a New Year's gift from the project, with the invitation to explore possibilities of filming youth's everyday life, video diaries (Pini and Walkerdine 2012), relations to family and friends, and growing up. Hence, footage for the film would be co-created by the film professionals, the family and the researchers. We had planned another three to four visits of the film crew over the next 18 months, covering the main young characters' school graduation and subsequent choices. At that time none of us had any idea that after February 2022 the phone footage would be the only footage available for the film. The reason was not that the border became impermeable for the project team: part of the crew were Russian citizens and could have continued working with the family. Rather, international funding was halted. With this change, the film would show growing up in Yamal mainly from the viewpoint of the young main character. Youth phone footage thus became out of necessity "a tool for cultural understanding that leverages digital communication"(Kozinets and Gretzel 2024: 2).

For this to work, the footage needed to get from the young person's phone in Yamal to the film professionals in the UK and the researchers in Finland. We achieved this with the help of a "fixer"[2] friend remotely and online; since 2022 hundreds of gigabytes of raw footage have been transferred. Subsequently, we had irregular video-conferences and written exchange with the family to discuss the progress of the project, the impressive filming skills of the young family member, and detailed conversations about the topics to be filmed in the upcoming period for the benefit of the film's storyline. All of the material is ultimately about relations: relations of the young character with her parents, with her grandparents, siblings, cousins, friends, teachers, reindeer, and dogs.

2 "Fixer" in filming and journalism jargon is a person who "fixes" logistics and practicalities on sites where the film teams work. See discussion section below.

After more than a year, it turned out that doing justice to the intergenerational relations and the family co-ownership of the planned film would be best possible with the use of interviews with key family members, professionally filmed in a quality suitable for big cinema. This could only be achieved face-to-face. After Finland declined issuing visa to the family, we opted for meeting in Turkey as visa-free third country. The logistics were challenging for all sides:

1 Organizing a meeting in a place no one was familiar with;
2 For the family, none of the key characters had ever been outside Russia; most had not even been outside of Yamal. The Finland visits mentioned above were by their parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles. Now they would travel as a family with four children, one just two years old, straight from the tundra to a completely alien world.
3 This put a great responsibility on the organizing party (the researchers).
4 Funding had to be obtained, which was not possible through usual sources due to the western policies. The film professionals assumed that responsibility, finding alternative sources.

The family did not even have passports for international travel; they first needed to apply for those, which implied questions by Russian officials: why would they want to travel abroad at this time, given that they never had been outside of Yamal before? Our local contact advised that the reply did not have to include any detail: after early 2022 Turkey had become one of the prime travel destinations for Russians abroad; going there was not unusual for Russian citizens.

We had arranged to meet the family, to meet them at the airport and bring them to the rented accommodation – a beautiful villa overlooking the sea, which hosted the whole team. Our relief was immense when we met, and the atmosphere of face-to-face co-creation injected the enthusiasm back in to the project. We shopped for the jointly prepared meals of 12 people, which produced the longest ever receipt we had seen: 150 cm of food items (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Grocery shopping together in Turkey, 2023.

Interviewing key family members also included organizing activities for those not engaged in filming at a given time. Hence, the work of co-creating these interviews was similar

to the fieldwork in Yamal: participants, who had known each other for decades, gave their entire personality to the relation. The combination of face-to-face sustaining of the decade-long relations *and* the previous netnography for two years were both pre-conditions for this meeting to produce useful outcomes.

After the interviews were completed, the film-crew left, while researchers and reindeer herder family added another four days of (self-financed) vacation. During this time, while no work was done formally, much talk ensued about the stark contrast between life in a nomadic *chum*, in a village in Yamal and in a megapolis. Like other colleagues working with reindeer herders, we notice that even in the most unusual situations (in this case a southern beach remote from the tundra) conversations with herders frequently slip back to human-reindeer relations. We observe how our field notes may be more about the reindeer than about the people, although as anthropologists our interest should be focused on the latter, as Tim Ingold (2013) has remarked.

Fig. 2 Bathing with a view, exciting for friends who had never travelled abroad before, 2023.

As with our other research topics, this tundra-village-city life comparison became most tangible through experience rather than talking or interviewing: exploring local sightseeing spots, jointly shopping and taking the children to the beach and playgrounds, and parks, bathing in the pool, all with a herder family that had never even been outside Yamal seemed surreal but rewarding for all participants (Fig. 2). To our shared experience of nomadic life in the tundra, now we added a totally different shared experience of a first time in a world with a completely different climate, people and country. This served to build additional trust in our relation: the herding family realised that they can trust this partnership even at difficult times, and the partners delivered on the promise to take care of the family in their first travel experience beyond their home region.

Case 2: South Yakutia

The authors' first fieldwork with Evenki herders in the taiga of southern Yakutia dates to 2016. Soon after, we invited a herder from this family to join us in an international pan-Arctic Indigenous exchange project, for sharing experiences with colleagues in Nunavut (Huntington 2017; Huntington et al. 2019; Ivanova et al. 2020). Our first focus was on Indigenous territorial governance in extractive industries settings (Stammler and Ivanova 2016; Sidortsov et al. 2016; Fondahl et al. 2019), followed by youth well-being in the Arctic (Stammler and Toivanen 2022), and human-animal relations (Stammler and Takakura eds. 2025, therein Ivanova and Stammler). Few communities remain where reindeer milk is a staple food in the summer and the milking of reindeer an everyday experience and skill. Sadly, this herding livelihood is under threat for several reasons: an increase of the wolf population has decimated the reindeer herds dramatically (Lavrillier and Gabyshev 2018); herders cope with the environmental and social impacts of mining over the last hundred years, and more recently some of the few young male Evenki herders serve in the Russian army, making it uncertain if they will be able to return to their herding livelihood.

The partnership involved yearly visits by both authors to the taiga and the village, researchers learning skills in reindeer riding and milking; joint travel to other locations in the Arctic; meeting at conferences (e.g. the Pan-Tungus conference in Blagoveshchensk, 2019). In 2022 we had planned a follow-up field visit focusing on the practice of cross-breeding wild reindeer males with domestic females for hybrid offspring, called *bayukan* (Anderson et al. 2017) – a study that remains unimplemented.

Research on these skills performed by young reindeer herders turned out to be impossible using netnography. Part of this lies in the personal preference of our field partners regarding using smartphones to document their everyday life. Beyond that there are also taboos that inhibit the use of netnography as a method in this case: the old lady of the family as well as her granddaughter were explicit about not taking photographs or videos of the milking of reindeer, as this may not be liked by the spirits in the forest and bring bad luck. Since in this particular partnership remote communication was more sporadic than in Yamal, we felt we need to sustain the relationship in face-to-face meetings, and started exploring third-country options after the previous positive experience. Unlike the Nenets in West Siberia, the Evenki straddle national borders, which made an exchange visit to the Chinese Evenki an attractive option for a face-to-face meeting. Not only would we be able to catch up with our field partners – we would also explore jointly the Chinese Evenki livelihood, again in a process of co-creation.

Cultural, topical and geographical affordances made Inner Mongolia a good arena for re-connecting: one can take a train from Yakutia to the Chinese border and cross the Amur River by ferry to enter China. This exchange would not have been possible without the participation of a colleague with long-term relations with the Chinese

Evenki. During a meeting in Rovaniemi, Richard Fraser offered to co-organise this meeting, as its goals met with his own research interest on reindeer, spirits and taiga lifestyles (Fraser 2021). The team was joined by Moscow-based linguist, Nadezhda Bulatova, as well as by Fraser's long-term partner Bai Ying, whose knowledge and wisdom were indispensable during the trip. An important aspect was the spontaneity and absence of a structured programme, which beneficially left time for the participants to share stories and experiences.

Half of the trip took place in the towns of the Orochen Autonomous Banner in Inner Mongolia, the capital settlement Alihe – Bai Ying's hometown, and also in the town of Genhe and the herders' village of Aologuya (Olguya), inhabited by the Evenki, sometimes called Yakut Evenki (Beach 2012). The programme included introduction to the official side of Orochen and Evenki culture in China, dinners hosted by local associations and institutions, including the local communist party sections, visits to museums, native arts, handicraft and tourism centres. For the Siberian participants, this part of the trip gave an idea of how different life was for their Indigenous counterparts in China. In contrast, in the forest our Siberian research partners felt at home immediately: they socialised seamlessly with the local herders, and jointly engaged in livelihood activities similar to those they practice at home.

This joint experience of practice with animals on the land led to intensive exchanges around the campfire, at times lasting all night, about the specifics of life in the forest and reindeer herding. The three researchers (Ivanova, Fraser, and Stammler) stepped back; they just observed how joint activities and storytelling evolved.

Fig. 3 Hands-on exchange of traditional veterinary knowledge between Inner Mongolian and Yakutian Evenki, 2023.

Life in town made the participants feel the stark differences between themselves and the Chinese Evenki, while life in the forest revealed the similarities. A lot of the storytelling and joint experience in the forest was about how the work of reindeer herding is done and is treated differently in Inner Mongolia and Siberia. The first striking difference was in the language. The Inner Mongolian and Siberian Evenki share their common language, yet in Aologuya only the elder generation speak Evenki, while young participants from Yakutia were fluent in Evenki. As a result, the conversations in the forest, without researchers' complicated translations unfolded across generations, between the elders from Inner Mongolia and the young herders from Siberia. This parallelled the traditional ways of knowing reindeer: whereas the Yakutian Evenki used most practices in their day-to-day routine with the reindeer in the forest, the same practices were not much in use in Aologuya and were considered "elders' knowledge." Younger camp members from Aologuya were keen to learn more from their Siberian counterparts but needed elders' translation from Evenki to Chinese to understand the verbal narrative accompanying the practices, like how to treat smaller reindeer antler infections and injuries in the forest with the help of ashes, or how to treat wounds without medical equipment, etc. (Fig. 3).

We did not set an agenda for discussions during the days in the forest, but the Sakha participants knew from our ongoing projects that our interest was mainly in the ways of knowing of wild and domestic animals, reindeer milking, hunting and herding regulations, and handicrafts. In two herding camps in the Inner Mongolian forest, partners in field exchange turned these topics into narratives and practices concerning traditional reindeer veterinary practices, reindeer grazing, hunting regulations, selective breeding, and also of the mobility between town and forest, and handicrafts demonstration sessions. Numerous similarities between the Evenki reindeer herding livelihood on the Inner Mongolian and Siberian sides were enthusiastically commented upon. They helped create a sense of belonging that increased the warmth on both sides, even if none of the participants had ever met before or travelled to each other's country.

The Aologuya Evenki were most curious about the stories of the extensive hunting trips that the Siberian Evenki told around the camp fire, leading to the intimate knowledge of the taiga that is well described in the anthropological literature (Brandišauskas 2016; Lavrillier and Gabyshev 2021; Davydov 2014). The Siberian partners were surprised about the role of tourism and velvet antlers for their Inner Mongolian counterparts. The entire village of "new" Aologuya is like an open-air museum where visitors buy entrance tickets (Fig. 4). Evenki were relocated there in 2003 from "old" Aologuyva some 200 km away (Xie 2015). In the new village planned by the Finnish consultancy Pöyry, they inhabit houses paid and maintained by the state and are involved in tourism. However, some people in the furthest forest camps closer to "old" Aologuya still hardly ever come to the new village, practicing the livelihood described by Hugh Beach (2012). That resembled more closely the herding life on the Yakutian

side, some of whom spend hardly any time in settlements, but those camps were too remote for us to reach during our limited time.

Fig. 4 The gate to new Aologuya Evenki village – today a popular tourist destination, 2023.

Towards the end of the exchange, all sides expressed the hope that contacts would continue, even without the use of social media, as the systems that people were familiar with were too different on both sides. This meant that the connection could continue only through researchers (i.e., from Yakutia to Finland to Tromsø and back to Inner Mongolia). Plans for direct Evenki-Evenki exchange so far have remained an unfulfilled dream and will depend on our chances to team up again.

Discussion

Our efforts of sustaining relations give rise to multiple ethical concerns. If no univocal answers to these concerns exist, we have discussed them with our partners. Building on the spirit of the major anthropological codes of ethics (American Anthropological Association 2012; Association of Social Anthropologists 2021), we mention implications rather than giving solutions. At first glance it seems that our efforts to sustain relations with our field partners are incommensurable with ethical imperatives that have been discussed at numerous conferences on Siberian and Russian studies since 2022. However, we consider an approach by Tsing (2016: 4–5), inspired by Strathern: "patiently sit in a muddle, not trying to solve it, but to take the time to consider incommensurability." We have considered some of the incommensurability between ethical claims and our practices, as demonstrated in the following three ethical dimensions of our efforts in sustaining relations:

Firstly, citizens of regimes which are politically on very different sides than the countries where we are employed and to whose ethical guidelines and legal regimes we want to abide, might possibly benefit from our sustained relations. Here we can only state that we are aware that our continued relations could possibly be used by Russia or China to support their assertions about their continuing respect for Indigenous rights and cultures, and to boast that they do not inhibit our contacts with people even in difficult times. While we are not aware of such arguments, we stress that such an assertion would be an unintended effect of our efforts to maintain friendship and collaboration. However, the benefits that our sustaining efforts afford our partnership outweigh such a risk.

A second ethical issue is whether or not political opinions of our research partners should influence our partnerships. We implemented our efforts in a scholarly environment in which the dominant opinion is that one should stop any collaboration until clarifying the political views of partners in Siberia related to the war. However, netnography can be only used to find out which people openly support the Russian regime (Allemann 2024). This could be useful for us for determining with whom NOT to work, but not for determining where those who do not openly write in support of the regime really stand politically. How do we interpret silence on social networks?

Hence, we were ready for a scenario that our partners, arriving in Turkey or Inner Mongolia, would turn out to be supportive of what is happening in Ukraine. In Turkey we remembered how we watched the Russian President's 2022 New Year speech together in Yamal. Back then we had heard no disagreement from our field partners. Before we met in Turkey and Inner Mongolia, we only knew that none of our partners was politically active or openly taking sides. We believe that the work we do together, and the friendships we sustain, go beyond the lifecycles of political currents. Such work cannot be done with all topics, but human-animal relations, adolescence and ways of knowing the land are topics relevant everywhere, which we do not see as politically loaded.

A third ethical dimension is our responsibility as researchers for the safety of our research partners. To what extent are they endangering themselves by cooperating with us? This question for us translated to a more general one: how much do we value our research partners on equal terms, respecting their sovereignty about their own life and their capacity to make their own decisions? We considered our responsibility similarly to our approach in Summer 2020 and December / January 2022 in connection to Covid-19: we took the precautions that we thought would be possible from our side, and openly discussed beforehand with our partners whether they would agree to us visiting in person. We employed the same strategy of precaution for the Turkey and China meetings: we discussed the meeting beforehand with our partners through our local contacts (i.e., no written conversation, and not using social media), acknowledging that the authorities may not approve of contacts with foreigners.

In both cases our partners chose not to highlight exactly whom they were meeting: There was nothing unusual on paper about their travel to one of the main Russian tourist destinations – Turkey, or to a Russian-Chinese border region. We emphasize that this was the outcome of our "discussions" related through local mediators and entirely our partners' decision. Our partners made informed decisions themselves about with whom to have contacts. We see our ethical responsibility as giving them the autonomy to choose if they want to meet, and then respecting that decision. Us deciding for them about their safety would have suggested a paternalistic approach, which is not in the spirit of the co-creation and reciprocity that we value in the relation to our partners. Our responsibility is to highlight possible concerns and provide access to relevant information. We passed this information on through our mediators inside Siberia, so our partners would not expose themselves during their decision making.

This brings to the fore the role of local mediators between us and our partners, which became more important after the war began. In many research situations anthropologists have built close relations with such people, often called "gatekeepers" or "cultural brokers." Robert Paine (1971) underscored their crucial role in influencing the way we do field research, with whom we partner, and the results we obtain. For some colleagues, these brokers become friends (Vitebsky 2012).

Differing from Vitebsky's case, our partners are not gate-keepers, brokers nor themselves ethnographically interested – they are exclusively practitioners on the land. We were assisted by additional long-term contacts, who were more like "fixers" in the film and media industry (see Hannerz 2002: 60ff). Such "fixers" also facilitate scientific expeditions to remote places; their stories usually remain untold (Driver and Jones 2009).

These persons' role was not only important for assisting us researchers with the ethical questions mentioned above. They also ensured continued contact before and after the physical meeting in third countries, as well as enabling the transfer of data across borders, which the reindeer herders would not engage in themselves. Such mediators made our sustaining such relations with partners possible.

We found that the balance between in-person meetings and "netnography" worked, but only because solid relations between researchers and field partners had been previously built on personal encounters. Our third-country meetings demonstrated the importance of these "netnographical bridges" between personal meetings as well as the limits of netnography: we found many topics, depth and dimensions in the relations that resurfaced during the personal meetings. Jointly experiencing the Inner Mongolian forest camps or an unfamiliar world of Turkey enhanced the depth of our topical conversations. We found that in our way of sustaining relations, remote and in-person encounters complemented but did not replace each other: netnography can sustain relations and bridge gaps, but personal contacts create or deepen relations.

This combination of remote and in-person meetings revealed wider-ranging potentials that we have yet to fully explore: both netnographic data and in-person

meetings in third countries lead to co-creation of knowledge that differs from the results that anthropologists bring back from their fieldwork with local partners. The videos and photos taken by our field partners differed greatly from those fieldwork video diaries that we as anthropologists produced from our stays in Siberia. In many respects our field friends produced a more detailed and close-up documentation than we could have achieved. We have yet to explore systematically what these differing perspectives imply for our scholarly understanding of these topics. This is one of the potentials we recognised resulting from the changed situation that forced us to develop new opportunities of co-creating knowledge.

Another potential lies in the subjectivity of such data produced. Before the reflexive turn in anthropology, we would have seen this as antithetical to objective, impartial scientific facts. Now fortunately we know that concealing the position of the author impairs our capacity to analyse this data rather than assuring its quality. The videos produced by herders after our remote conversations have the added value of not only documenting life-episodes, to continue giving us insights in everyday experiences in the Siberian Arctic; they provide insights into the meanings for our partners of those facts that they document. Their perspective is for us anthropologists as revealing as the documented livelihood episodes themselves. We believe that this amplifies the voice and perspective of our research partners. This does not make our field partners "para-ethnographically inclined reflexive subjects and counterparts" (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 93; see also Vitebsky 2012). While reflexive and subjects, they do not have any ethnographic ambitions, being more interested in their own livelihood than our science.

The third-country meetings revealed additional opportunities: in Turkey and Inner Mongolia all partners explored how we can harness advantages of meeting on neutral ground. These encounters enabled re-connecting the relation after the physical disconnect, to return to anthropological terminology of relations. The settings created a new kind of equality between researchers and field partners: both sides met in a place alien to them in terms of geography, language and culture. Previously, one side had been at home, while the other side were the guests. In these third countries joint experiences such as a shopping or interrogation at the immigration administration were alien for all, thus increasing our bonding and common sense of belonging, hence strengthening our relations. Lastly, in an alien place, with fewer distractions from home & work, it was easier to concentrate on the common goal of the meeting. Hence, in person meetings in third countries created the opportunity to experience partnership on terms that differ from fieldwork or visits to each other's homes.

Conclusions

As formal research cooperation between social scientists and their partners in Siberia continues to be officially banned as of spring 2025, this chapter illustrates some of the niches that remain open for sustaining relations. We consider this effort worthwhile despite many headwinds we face today. Not only are these relations dear to us personally. Certain scholarly topics cannot be studied anywhere but in Siberia, and the loss of observations from there would be a loss for the global community (Rees et al. 2023).

Strathern (2020) has shown how relations can persist, despite disconnect, but connection and re-connecting give rise to relations. The chapter describes our efforts to sustain the relations remotely, after the physical disconnect of newly impermeable borders, using various means summarised under the term of "netnography." We have shown its limitations, but also its opportunities for more intensive co-creation in anthropology: the voice and input of our Indigenous partners increases when the researchers themselves do not contribute to creating "raw" field experiences. This shift might offer new opportunities in de-colonising scholarship and analytical perspectives for anthropologists, when we analyse materials of our field partners instead of our own.

However, such means cannot fully fill the gap left by the physical disconnect. In-person meetings in third places offered unexpected opportunities for not only keeping the relations, but adding new dimensions to them. Part of this is conditioned by the change in positionality of the meeting parties in a more neutral place, which creates a new equality between researchers and partners.

We emphasize that there is no single way of sustaining relations. These cases provide examples of what has worked for us to nurture existing relations, but we could not see how such would work for building new ones. For early-career researchers keen to establish relations with Siberian partners, this method would be hard to imagine: trust needs to grow first. The transfer of intimate and personal data online depends on such pre-existing trust, and so do meetings in new, unknown places.

We hope this chapter may influence our colleagues to not "switch off" their partnerships with Siberian friends. This will enable us to seamlessly continue with our work if and when research cooperation is again permitted. We refuse to become "unrelated" or to enter a period of "post-relations" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Rather, we seek ways to breathe life to Strathern's abstract observation that connection has as its antithesis a "disconnection," while relation does not have a good word match (2020: 110). Instead of "dis/un-relating," we discovered ways to re-connect and to sustain our partnerships.

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Figures

1 Grocery shopping together in Turkey. Photo: Florian Stammler, 2023.
2 Bathing with a view, exciting for friends who had never travelled abroad before. Photo: Aytalina Ivanova 2023.
3 Hands-on exchange of traditional veterinary knowledge between Inner Mongolian and Yakutian Evenki. Photo: Florian Stammler, 2023.
4 The gate to new Aologuya Evenki village – today a popular tourist destination. Photo: Aytalina Ivanova, 2023.