Walking with, Walking Past/s: Contested Landscapes in Gilbbesjávri, Sápmi

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Abstract. This article interrogates the contested landscapes of Gilbbesjávri, Sápmi, integrating participatory research with an innovative walking methodology. Using an improvised walk around Lake Čáhkáljávri as both a research tool and critical framework, the study explores the interplay of land use, heritage, and identity in northern Fennoscandia. It examines how state-led conservation policies, tourism development, and shifting border dynamics intersect with traditional Sámi reindeer-herding practices and Indigenous knowledge of the land. By juxtaposing infrastructures with erased and marginalized heritage, the article highlights how landscape is an active force in shaping social relations and community resistance. Moreover, the embodied act of walking challenges dominant cartographic and managerial representations, underscoring the need for decolonial approaches that honor local memory and relational experiences. Our findings highlight how landscapes are not static backdrops but fluid, contested spaces where visible and invisible forces connect and divide communities. This reconceptualization offers implications for rethinking environmental governance and advancing Indigenous land rights in the Arctic.

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ARCTIC ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 60, No. 2, pp. 150–167, 2023 ISSN 0066-6939 e-ISSN 1933-8139
doi:10.3368/aa.60.2.150 © 2026 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

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> Unlike sometimes incorrectly claimed, the glacier buttercup is not a victim of climate change, but of the environmental destruction caused by reindeer mass grazing . . . . Goodbye, glacier buttercup, goodbye Malla nature preserve! Thirty-two years of our buttercup expeditions are over because there is nothing left to study (Järvinen and Järvinen 2014:xx).

This quote, attributed to the former director of the University of Helsinki's Biological Research Station in Gilbbesjávri (Fi. Kilpisjärvi) and his spouse, reveals various aspects of conflict in the village and the surrounding landscape. Nestled in the northwest corner of Finland, at the national borders with Norway and Sweden, Gilbbesjávri has long been at the center of tensions related to land use and the future of the village. The quote highlights two key conflicts: those surrounding the Malla Strict Nature Reserve, which was first legally protected in 1916 and later designated as a nature park in 1938, and the role of reindeer in the region's landscape, both literally and figuratively (see Heikkinen 2002). Over time, Gilbbesjávri has become entrenched in the Finnish social imaginary as one of the country's "national landscapes," with Lake Gilbbesjávri and the Malla and Sáná fells holding a mythical presence in the Finnish mindscape (Valtonen 2019). Heritage is actively shaped through state and cultural narratives, and landscapes framed as national memory often become mythologized and contested (Lowenthal 1994; Smith 2006). The region's rise as a nature-based tourism destination took shape after World War II, as Finland-based German troops built a road, Finnish settlers arrived, and the area began to assume its vaunted reputation (Stichelbaut et al. 2021).

While the village that stands today is Finnish in origin, with its inhabitants predominantly ethnic Finns, Gilbbesjávri and the surrounding region are part of Sápmi, the ancestral homeland of the Indigenous Sámi. Well before the village emerged—indeed, before state borders in the area were ever defined (Seitsonen and Viljanmaa 2021)—this area had long been a part of Sámi reindeer-herding landscapes, mindscapes, and "taskscapes" (Ingold 1974, 1993). The opening quote reflects tensions between different groups in Gilbbesjávri: the discontent among biologists over the destruction of a "unique" landscape otherwise subject to strict preservation, the frustration of villagers with the prominent reindeer presence, and the very mixed feelings among local residents regarding Gilbbesjávri's development, particularly as pertains to tourism.

The varying and sometimes contradictory perceptions of, and attitudes toward, issues such as nature preservation and reindeer grazing provide a lens through which a host of deeper questions of power, community dynamics, and the pasts, presents, and futures of landscapes emerge. This article employs the artifice of an improvised circumambulation of Lake Čáhkáljávri with a reindeer herder—one of the authors—as a research method. This approach allows us to walk the reader not only through key localities in the Gilbbesjávri landscape but also through a series of conflicts and broader cultural implications tied to these spaces. During the walk around the lake, located just outside the village of Gilbbesjávri, we paused at five distinct points—each significant to locals in different ways—that were chosen by the herder, Juha Tornensis. At each stop, we reflected on the social and cultural implications of issues that emerged in discussions during our walk. This participatory research experience, experimental in many ways, prompted us to critically consider the role of community and community resistance in relation to land use, particularly in the context of Sápmi's landscapes, where histories are both present and absent. For Juha and for us, the stops offered new insights into the nature of the conflicts around Gilbbesjávri and their entanglement with ways of seeing and being in the world, amid the multiple pressures and changes shaping the region.

Part of our interest in this approach stems from walking as a research method (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Norum et al. 2025; Springgay and Truman 2018). When hikers walk a given landscape, they do so in a particular way—distinct from how we walked alongside Juha or how herders walk across a landscape. In hiking, a landscape is typically traversed along established trails, with hikers using digital or analog maps, often completing a trail as an achievement—"conquering" or "finishing" it (Kaján 2014). Our starting point for this article is the idea that land management and governance practices often treat landscapes in a similar fashion: a "top-down" approach that reduces the lived reality of the landscape to technocratic management tools. This contrasts with knowledge creation that builds from the ground up, embracing diverse experiences of landscape that hold multiple cultural meanings for various peoples (see, e.g., Kusenbach 2003; Latour 1987, 2005; Marcus 1995). This creates potential conflicts on the local level, especially in places like Gilbbesjávri, where different groups claim ownership or meaning over the same landscape. In what follows, we aim to reveal and engage with the connective and disconnective forces of land, landscape, and cohabitation in the Arctic.

The tensions surrounding land in Gilbbesjávri must be considered in relation to different modes of perceiving, knowing, and engaging with landscape, each shaped by literal and metaphorical proximity and distance (see Ingold 2000; Kusenbach 2003). The dynamics of these perspectives—proximity and distance—are more

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complex than they may initially seem, just as, from a cartographic and governance standpoint, there is much more to land-related disagreements and their management in Gilbbesjávri (and beyond) than initially meets the eye. Distance and proximity, both literally and metaphorically, are central to our exploration of the connective and divisive qualities of the landscape, which reflect different ways of perceiving and relating to the environment (e.g., Simandan 2016). Generally speaking, "distance" is exemplified by a cartographic vision of the world, which makes faraway places seem accessible and big areas appear small and manageable (see Massey 2005). "Proximity," in contrast, is embodied by being in a space—by walking in and through the world.

The complexity of these perspectives requires a deeper attentiveness to the literally or figuratively invisible dimensions of how once-colonized or presently governed lands connect and disconnect various people to and from place, its transformations, past, heritage, and one another (Lounela et al. 2019). This article offers critical perspectives on knowledge creation in anthropology and archaeology—disciplines with long-standing colonial legacies that must not only be reassessed but also reconstructed to produce equitable knowledge that reflects the voices they seek to represent. This is especially crucial in the high North, where listening to the full range of community members is more essential than ever, given the vital role of local knowledge in understanding and addressing the complex processes and cumulative nature of environmental change (see Österlin et al. 2022).

The article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the historical and political context of Gilbbesjávri, situating contemporary land-use conflicts within a broader history of Sámi dispossession, colonial governance, and conservationist policies in Finland. This section highlights how Gilbbesjávri has become a site of Finnish national heritage, tourism, and scientific research, often at the expense of Sámi land rights and cultural visibility. Next, we discuss our methodological approach, which incorporates both Indigenous and non-Indigenous modes of engaging with the environment. We also draw on recent scholarship in walking methodology to illustrate how movement through the landscape generates knowledge distinct from the fixed, mapped representations used in governance and tourism. The main body of the article is organized around five key locations along our walk, each of which serves as an ethnographic entry point into different aspects of the broader conflicts in Gilbbesjávri. This ethnographic investigation is followed by a critical examination of how governance structures and conservation policies within an emerging tourism economy continue to reinforce asymmetrical power relations in Gilbbesjávri. We analyze how Finnish state policies prioritize nature preservation and tourism at the expense of Indigenous land rights, highlighting the epistemological conflicts between cartographic, top-down management approaches and Sámi relational understandings of land. Finally, in our conclusion, we reflect on the implications of our findings for land governance and Indigenous rights in the Arctic. We argue that recognizing Sámi ways of knowing and engaging with the land is essential for creating equitable and just land-use policies. We also suggest that walking as a methodological tool offers valuable insights for decolonial research, centering Indigenous perspectives in discussions of landscape, heritage, and governance.

Background: Walking, Talking, and Seeing a Conflicted Landscape

In September 2018, a meeting was held in the village of Hetta, the center of the Eanodat (Fi. Enontekiö) municipality, between local municipal officials, representatives from the Gilbbesjávri Biological Research Station, our university in Finland, and members of the local Sámi reindeer-herding cooperative (SáN. Giehtaruohttasa bálggus; Fi. Käsivarren paliskunta). The head of the cooperative, Juha Tornensis, asked whether someone in the group could help document the remaining material traces of Sámi reindeer-herding traditions in the landscape before they disappear forever. These tangible and intangible heritages are directly connected to Juha's own family and other related Sámi families, and they are fundamental to the region's history, though they are often overlooked by both local municipal and heritage officials. From the conservationists' perspective, reindeer and reindeer herding are often seen as a secondary, even disruptive, addition to this Arctic landscape (Heikkinen 2002). When tourists arrive in this part of the Arctic, they typically encounter manicured pathways, detailed landscape maps, and wooden signs professionally designed to look old, but little that speaks to the rich human–animal histories of the area. Juha recognized the importance of maintaining and remembering the past ways and traditions inscribed in the landscape. As Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg remarked in the permanent exhibition "These Lands Are Our Children" at the Sámi Museum Siida,

> [i]t has been said about the old Sámi ways of life that they left no trace. They left a trace all right, but those traces are under their descendants' skin. The body remembers things that the brain does not.

While the embodied nature of history is crucial, it is equally important not to overstate the

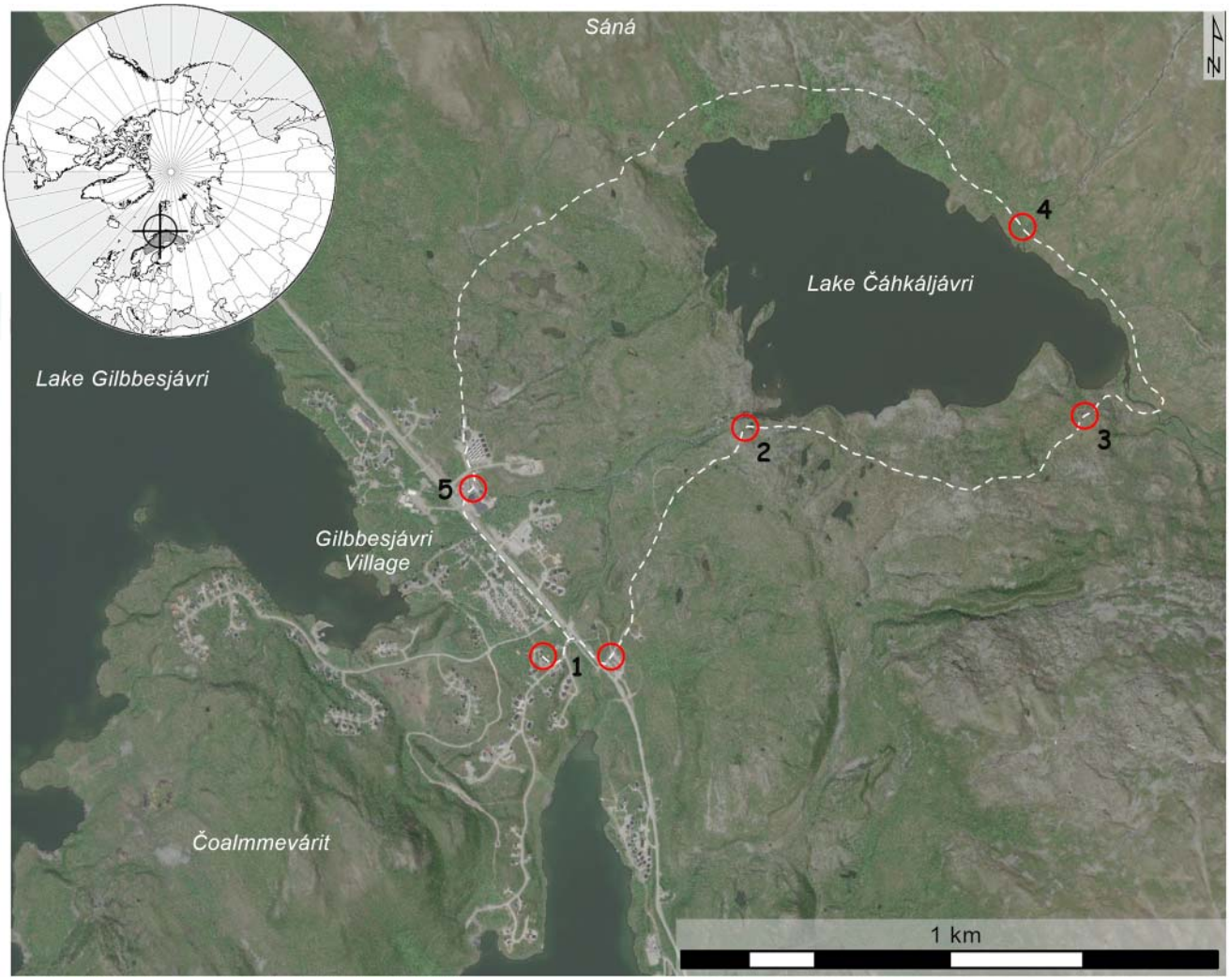

Figure 1. Map of Gilbbesjávri and the walk we took through the ancestral Sámi landscape.

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dichotomy between the tangible and the intangible. Although traces exist in the body, there are also material elements of tradition and heritage embedded in the landscape, attesting to the tangible manifestation of Indigenous knowledge and practices. As Keith Basso (1996) eloquently put it, "Wisdom sits in places."

Besides remembering, Juha also sought official recognition and protection for this heritage—his own—and to legitimize the traditional land-use rights and claims in the area based on the long history of Sámi habitation and use of the landscape. The inconspicuous, often invisible, and relatively recent traces, memories, and places of memory that Juha hoped to map have typically garnered little interest from state heritage authorities in Helsinki—at the far opposite end of the country—or from local land-use planners; in other words, these elements have not been recognized as heritage in any official sense. While the rich material and immaterial Sámi heritage is present, it is not regarded as such, amplifying the (false) notion that reindeer herding is an intrusive element in the environment. Depending on one's perspective, this is viewed as a political act of misdirection, a deliberate act of erasure, or an unintended consequence of top-down imposition and inadvertent misinformation and forgetting.

The collaboration meeting in the northern village of Hetta did not immediately yield any concrete results. However, the issue resurfaced later when the authors were in contact with Juha, and an opportunity emerged for a group of Finland-based researchers and students to conduct fieldwork with him in Gilbbesjávri in 2020. At the outset, neither the researchers nor Juha had a predefined plan for how to approach the documentation Juha envisioned. The basic idea, however,

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was to begin by recognizing and documenting Sámi heritage from a Sámi perspective. Juha had long-standing connections in the region and had previously worked with one of the authors on reindeer-herding practices in Gilbbesjávri. He was eager to reestablish and strengthen the cooperation between academic researchers and community members in the area. This article discusses one aspect of the collaboration between Juha and the authors, framed through a walk that Juha led around Lake Čáhkáljávri (Fi. Tsahkaljärvi) (Fig. 1).

Walking is one exemplary model of relational and embodied knowing (Norum et al. 2025; Seamon 1980; Springgay and Truman 2018). As we prepared for our walk with Juha, we first sat down together with him around a map to discuss the Gilbbesjávri landscape and learn about some of the places meaningful to him and his family. However, once we had gathered around it, it quickly became clear that the map would be a poor substitute for being out in the landscape itself. Indeed, Juha himself was uncomfortable with the map as a representation of the land that he knows so well and intimately, pointing out several errors in the placement of toponyms. He summed it up when he huffed, "Maps are for tourists." The meaning of this became very clear once we embarked on our walk, encountering the real, experienced landscape and seeing how it not only inspired stories, memories, reflections, and insights but also opened up spaces for engagement and critical reflection. This should come as no surprise, of course, given the abundant research on how people are deeply entangled with places and on the use of "walking methodologies" in various forms of scientific research (e.g., Benediktsson and Lund 2011; Seamon 1980).

For many scientists and cosmopolitan urbanites, a cartographic perspective is often foundational in orienting to and approaching a given landscape. Planners and developers employ maps and databases (and related objectifying forms of data), and maps are also integral to the practices of hikers and tourists experiencing the landscape. Walking with Juha, however, presented the landscape in a different manner. His slow and conscious pacing fostered a particular kind of awareness of and attentiveness to the landscape, opening it up in a way that allowed us to see it differently from the more goal-oriented "hiking-as-doing" (cf. Kaján 2014). It has been pointed out that northerners cannot afford to rush, as rash or thoughtless decisions can be detrimental—and even deadly—in the extreme environment of the Arctic. Indeed, it is "a [Sámi] cultural strategy" that "you must not be too hasty," which applies not just to everyday decision-making but also to broader contexts: it is "important to retain composure and allow the real impacts of change to reveal themselves," as an information panel at the Sámi Museum Siida puts it.

In this article, we aim to highlight that these conflicts involve more than just disagreements over a particular form of land use. At their core, they are embedded in deeper issues related to differing perceptions of, attitudes to, and ways of knowing the environment. One challenge here is that different systems of knowledge carry varying levels of authority, with local knowledge often subordinated to the dominant managerial governance perspectives. Given this power imbalance, we asked Juha to take us on a walk through the landscape that holds significant meaning for him and his family. We hoped that, together, we could consider the various local conflicts surrounding this landscape from the perspective of "being there," engaging with and discussing the topics that emerged during and after the walk. In the sections that follow, we outline the geographical and cultural context of our Gilbbesjávri case study before describing our walk with Juha across the landscape and discussing the key themes mentioned above.

The Scene: Gilbbesjávri Landscapes

When Finland celebrated its hundredth year of independence in December 2017, the Sáná (SáN) (Fi. Saana) fell in Gilbbesjávri was entirely illuminated with blue light, evoking the Finnish flag. This illumination of Sáná, which was reportedly the largest instance of site-specific illumination art in the world, provoked divided reactions in the Finnish media. Some viewed the creative endeavor as a colonialist act of imperial violence or at least a symbol of the perpetuation of Finnish colonialism in the North (Valtonen 2019). The colonial activities of Nordic countries have taken various forms in northern Fennoscandia over several centuries (e.g., Lehtola 2015; Naum and Nordin 2013). The Finnish Ministry of Environment has designated Sáná as one of the 156 "nationally valuable landscapes," describing it as "possibly the best known of all the fells in Lapland. Its awe-inspiring appearance and the spectacular views from the top have made it a popular tourist destination" (VAMA 2021:16–19, 193; our translation). Indeed, Sáná has become an iconic landscape in Finland, largely due to Lapland tourism since the 1950s and 1960s. It is in this context that the Gilbbesjávri area has developed a "mythical" aura that resonates with Finns in general and with the Finnish inhabitants of the village in particular, most of whom have moved to Gilbbesjávri from elsewhere (Valtonen 2019). However, the area's original Indigenous users and inhabitants, the reindeer-herding mountain Sámi, have a very different ancestral relation to Sáná and its surrounding landscape.

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A century ago, when Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917, the Gilbbesjávri area was perceived in markedly different ways by the few people with direct connections to the region. These included primarily local Sámi families who used the area as a seasonal pasture. Additionally, a traditional pathway passed through Gilbbesjávri, connecting the city of Tornio in Finland (which had been part of Sweden until 1809) in the northernmost Baltic Sea to Skibotn by the Arctic Ocean in Norway. The local Sámi were actively involved in these transnational networks over the centuries, facilitating mobility and trade (e.g., Kortekangas 2022). While tourism began to develop in this region as early as the 1930s, it was not until World War II that a proper road was built by German troops stationed in Finland, connecting Gilbbesjávri to the Norwegian coast on one end and the mouth of the Palojoki River on the other (e.g., Heikkinen 2021). Traditional mobilities had taken place along the waterways and across land using reindeer and horse transportation. The newly constructed road also served as a retreat route for German troops at the end of the war, during 1944–1945. Indeed, for Finns, World War II ended when the last of the German troops departed from Gilbbesjávri—adding yet another historical (and nationalistic) layer to Finnish perceptions of this landscape (see Valtonen 2019). For Sámi reindeer herders, however, the Gilbbesjávri region was part of their ancestral seasonal home range and pasturelands, which they moved through annually between summer and winter pastures (Manker 1953). The fells and lands surrounding Gilbbesjávri formed one part of the intricate network of herders, reindeer, and landscape but were not singled out as being particularly "special"—a distinction they would later gain in Finnish touristic representations of the area (Valtonen 2019).

Even before 1917, reindeer herding in and around Gilbbesjávri was already undergoing significant changes. The border between Norway, Sweden, and Finland had been established long before Finland gained independence in 1917 (Finland had been an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia from 1809 to 1917). However, national borders began to affect the seasonal mobility patterns of reindeer herders as early as the latter half of the 19th century, when previously open borders were closed to herders, and their movements began to be regulated (Näkkäläjärvi 2013). While these changes did not render the border impermeable, they nonetheless had significant long-term impacts on the Sámi and their way of life. For example, during World War I, Gilbbesjávri became a waypoint along a route used to transport military supplies from Western Europe to Russia, marking a step toward increased connectivity and the growing influence of nation-state dynamics in the region. In 1916, the area around Malla (Fig. 1) was also designated as a protected area, and in 1936, it was further classified as a Strict Nature Reserve (Jokinen 2005).

Borders and bordering in their various forms lie at the heart of land-use and cultural conflicts in Gilbbesjávri, especially because, at one point in the not-too-distant past, reindeer—even semidomesticated ones—were able to roam freely across state borders. Finland's national border with Norway and Sweden passes immediately outside the village, significantly affecting the mobility of reindeer herders in the region since the late 19th century (Manker 1953). Likewise, the Malla Strict Nature Reserve, an area now off-limits to reindeer though it traditionally served as an important summer pasture, has clearly defined (though not always clearly marked or fenced) boundaries. In addition to "formal" geopolitical or physical borders, there are also diverse physical, social, and mental boundaries that influence land-use conflicts, such as roads and tourist trails, which affect reindeer herding. Given the prominence of borders and boundaries in the landscapes and mindscapes of Gilbbesjávri—and, more broadly, in human lifeworlds—we pay particular attention to how tensions and conflicts in the area unfold in relation to various boundaries. But now, let us embark on a journey through the Sámi herders' ancestral landscape, guided by Juha.

Point 1: Juha's Home and the Gáijohaš' *Gieddi* under the Luontotalo Parking Lot

In the summer of 1989, Juha Tornensis and his family built a house on the Salmivaara peninsula in Gilbbesjávri (Fig. 1) to be closer to their summer reindeer pastures. This arrangement was part of housing policies under which the state assigned land to reindeer herders and practitioners of nature-based livelihoods through new legislation (Porotilalaki 590/1969; Luontaiselinkeinolaki 610/1984). The latter law was passed when Juha was a young herder just beginning his career. At the time, the Salmivaara peninsula had no other buildings, and new residents like Juha were required to establish their own connections to municipal infrastructure, such as the sewer system. Several other lots on the peninsula were designated for people practicing a mix of nature-based livelihoods, but none of the houses, apart from Juha's, were completed. Later, many of these lots were acquired by Finnish newcomers from further south, who mostly engaged in tourism activities. Juha's original home, before moving to Gilbbesjávri, was his father's house, located closer to their winter

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pastures in Karesuvando, about 100 km to the south. It is this type of housing arrangement that has made the current transhumance of Sámi reindeer herding—in contrast to traditional reindeer nomadism—possible (Heikkinen 2002).

The fencing of the narrow mouth of the Salmivaara peninsula allowed Juha to keep his reindeer safe, especially the bulls used for sledding and tourism purposes. Since childhood, Juha had been involved in reindeer-based and Sámi culture-based tourism activities, such as taking tourist groups on reindeer rides, which sometimes included traditional joik singing. This type of Sámi cultural tourism has been a part of Juha's family livelihood in Gilbbesjávri since the early 1990s. However, since the mid-1990s, more and more land around Salmivaara has been allocated for holiday homes, new residences, and tourism, including the development of a large campsite with rental cottages and infrastructure for campervans, which has completely cut off Juha's reindeer farm from its pasturelands. Today, it is very difficult to move reindeer in and out of their home estate (which comprises a modest 1.13 ha of land), where the family has built a small pen for the bulls used in tourism activities and a large wooden *lávvu* (Fig. 2). A key challenge now is getting the reindeer through the densely built area surrounding the peninsula for activities outside the farm. Salmivaara has, in a sense, become fenced off—though not quite in the way that Juha envisioned when establishing his home and farm there. Juha and his family have repeatedly attempted to halt developments that block their home yard from the free ranges, but these efforts have been futile. This situation has only strengthened his motivation to influence decision-making regarding his native landscapes; in fact, it ultimately led him to contact us in the first place, sparking this ongoing research.

Figure 2. A group of researchers from the authors' university in Juha's family's reindeer pen in their backyard (Photograph Heikkinen 2020).

Our narration walk began at his home yard, where it was immediately evident how much of Juha's reindeer farm is now blocked. From there, we continued across the Gilbbesjávri road to the recently built Nature Center, whose parking lot was constructed over the former campsite of another Sámi family, the Juuso family. This area also marks the beginning of historical and current reindeer fences, which form the starting point of the summer pasture system. It is also where Juha's reindeer community once had campsites, where they would wait for the annual reindeer calf earmarking to begin after midsummer.

Point 2: Lake Čáhkáljávri Trail, Recreational Infrastructure, and an Arson

A newly built walking trail leads from the gently sloping Luontotalo parking lot up the hill toward Lake Čáhkáljávri, about one kilometer away. This wider gravel trail replaced a narrow traditional footpath in 2017, when it was laid down with support from LEADER, a financial instrument of the EU's structural policy that funds community-led development initiatives. The construction of the trail coincided with the development of recreational and nature tourism facilities near the lake. Two closed huts [Fi. *kota*] were designed as a base for tourist entrepreneurs, while an open *kota*, firewood shed, and latrine were intended for use by locals and visitors alike. Both the trail and the recreational infrastructure were designed to make Lake Čáhkáljávri a more accessible and attractive destination for tourists, given its proximity to the village center. This initiative is part of the municipality's broader goal to increase tourism in Gilbbesjávri by offering more diverse opportunities for nature-based activities. According to the final report of the trail project, it supports tourism businesses in Gilbbesjávri while attempting to minimize the negative impacts of tourism on reindeer herding and the local environment (Kilpisjärven ladut ry 2021). The trail's route was planned to avoid known archaeological sites—early prehistoric habitation sites and a historic Sámi dwelling site—though its construction partly destroyed a previously unmapped Sámi site. The trail ends directly at a Stone Age site, where a fireplace and other facilities were built (Seitsonen and Viljanmaa 2021).

From the perspective of reindeer herders, the construction of the Čáhkáljávri Trail was the lesser of two potential evils when the municipality was discussing possible interventions in the area. The alternative was to repurpose a German-built World

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War II supply road running between the Jiehkas and Sáná fells to build sports infrastructure, which would have had a far more detrimental impact on herding patterns and reindeer mobilities. However, the proposal to build the Čáhkáljávri Trail and tourism facilities by the lake did not receive unanimous approval from the villagers—a fact that came to public light when an apparent act of arson in September 2019 destroyed the newly completed buildings (Fig. 3). Interestingly, the open *kota*, which was intended for villagers' use, was spared from the fire. Like the woodshed, it had been primarily built through volunteer work—one-third of its construction, or approximately 60 man-hours. Because villagers had invested their own labor, they felt the site also belonged to them, viewing it as a communal space.

This frames the arson that destroyed the structures intended for use by tourism entrepreneurs in an interesting light. The perpetrators were never caught, and to this day, the crime remains unsolved. However, the incident provides insights into the sociopolitical and cultural issues surrounding Gilbbesjávri´s contested landscapes and how these are navigated in a small, remote community. While everyone in the village likely knows what happened, people are careful not to point fingers. As a result, everything remains a speculative rumor. One story we were told alleged that a "foreign woman" ["*ulkomaalainen nainen*"] had been behaving strangely and was seen carrying a candle near the facilities around the time of the arson. To date, no one has been prosecuted for the arson. One might imagine that if the events were truly "common knowledge," Metsähallitus, as the site's owner, would have pursued the matter further.

The attribution of blame for the arson to an unknown outsider raises interesting questions about the community dynamics and how its members share a lived world. So does the implication that "everybody knows" what happened, which leads us to the broader issue of mutuality. First, it is notable that the open communal *kota* was not burned down, suggesting that the arson was likely directed at the tourism entrepreneurs' facilities. If this was deliberate, the act could easily be seen as reflecting local tensions over competing and conflicting land uses, with tourism development not always viewed positively by all. However, the dividing lines within the community and among the various interest groups are far from clear-cut. For instance, while (nature-based) tourism and reindeer herding often represent differing—sometimes even opposing—interests regarding land use, reindeer herders in Gilbbesjávri (and other parts of Finland) are also actively involved in the tourism business. Indeed, Juha's own family had been engaged in tourism since the 1960s, establishing a small stall by the road where they sold reindeer antlers, hides, and traditional handicrafts to passing tourists.

Returning to the arson case—and how community members deal with conflicts and friction within their sociocultural and environmental context—both the "everybody knows but nobody speaks" and "blaming it on an outsider" approaches begin to make sense. They reveal something important about the community and, more broadly, about "northern" ways of life characterized by mutuality and reciprocity (e.g., Herva and Lahelma 2020; Ingold 2000). Despite very real conflicts, people in this remote community must live together and share the same landscape, continuously and collaboratively negotiating their place and path through—and, at times, together against—this world. This might explain why the explicitly commercial buildings were destroyed in the arson, while the open, communal *kota* was left intact. The philosophy and practice of "living together"—recognizing how everything in the world is entangled and how human life unfolds dynamically in relation to other human and nonhuman actors (e.g., Herva and Lahelma 2020; Ingold 2000)—can take multiple forms and expressions, and not everyone subscribes to it. It is a central principle of the "traditional" Sámi relational perception of and engagement with the environment (Bunikowski 2015). This way of living in and with the surrounding world and beings, which emphasizes situational knowledge and contextuality, contrasts sharply with more modern, control-based approaches to the world. These are often exemplified by the idea of nature (and nature reserves) as something separate from humans and commodified, as well as the notion of understanding the

Figure 3. Burnt patches, traces of arson, and a new log cabin being built to replace the one incinerated at Lake Čáhkáljávri in 2019 (Photograph Seitsonen 2019).

world cartographically—literally and figuratively from above and outside the lived-in world.

Point 3: Lake Čáhkáljávri Gárdi

Walking from the site of the arson farther along the narrow trail that runs along the southern shore of Lake Čáhkáljávri, the footpath crosses a small meadow-like opening in the mountain birch brush (Fig. 4). This scenic spot occasionally attracts the attention of hikers, though the historical and cultural significance of the site usually goes unnoticed. However, this meadow-like patch constitutes an important *lieu de mémoire* (or memory space; Nora 1989) for the Gova Siida, a local Sámi family group. It was once the location of their old *gárdi* (Fi. *kaarre*), a traditional reindeer fence made from twigs and branches, which was used in the 1960s for seasonally corralling their animals (Fig. 4). *Gárdi* fences are typically used during the summertime calf ear-marking. The meadow-like vegetation here results from recurrent human and reindeer activity, which has enriched the soil (e.g., Itkonen 1948:274; see also Karlsson 2006:163; Løvschal 2021; Seitsonen and Égüez 2021). Apart from this roughly circular opening in the birch thicket, there are few visual or material indications of the past nature and significance of the site. Its former uses are present not as tangible markers, but rather as absences—or, more aptly, as ghostly presences. In addition to the opening, only some scattered burnt rocks from the hearths of another Sámi family group, the Labba Siida, along the shore testify to past activities at the site.

This inconspicuous *gárdi* site exemplifies the typically "invisible" nature of Sámi heritage to outsiders. However, for those familiar with the landscape, small details—such as changes in the vegetation—reveal long and rich histories of ancestral land use (see Tervaniemi and Magga 2019). Given the inconspicuous and ephemeral nature of this cultural heritage in the landscape, these environments may appear as "pristine nature" to tourists and other outsiders. Cultural heritage is often associated with tangible and even monumental expressions, whereas Sámi land-use principles and ethics are based on mutual respect between people and the land, emphasizing leaving as little trace of one's activities in the landscape as possible (Magga 2007:15; Tervaniemi and Magga 2019). Organic, perishable materials were primarily used for fencing and other purposes until the late 20th century. In contrast, industrial products have become more common today and can be quite conspicuous in the environment, even after a fence has collapsed. Consequently, metal fences may appear "ugly" and intrusive to tourists, especially since outsiders often cannot connect these modern constructions to the long, invisible histories of land use. For outsiders, unused or collapsed metal fences or openings in the thicket may seem like nothing more than debris, not registering as cultural heritage or, indeed, as anything of value. However, for the Sámi, these elements are deeply tied to the land and long-standing traditions, even when made from modern materials.

Contemporary, urban-centered ways of understanding the environment largely depart from nature management practices, transforming the "natural" environment both symbolically and materially into something "cultural" (Heikkinen et al. 2025; Lowenthal and Olwig 2015). This approach applies not only to distinctly human spaces, such as cities, but also to nature preserves like the Sáná and Malla in Gilbbesjávri. However, these preserves are brought under human control in different ways: their boundaries are defined and demarcated, and their environment is monitored and managed to resemble the valued natural elements, among other strategies. In this sense, they are constructed—as idealized nature—much like buildings, though seemingly history-less and devoid of human impact (cf. Keskitalo 2025). While urban ways of life tend to prioritize permanence and "fixing" oneself to specific places, the life of the reindeer herder is more "spread out" across the landscape and constantly in motion, even though herders today also have permanent houses. Mobile lifeways not only affect how herders perceive and relate to the environment, but the mobilities themselves—and the relative absence of traces they leave behind—have contributed to the belief among many Finnish settlers in Gilbbesjávri that they were the "first" to occupy the area. This perception arose because when they moved in,

Figure 4. Lake Čáhkáljávri gárdi in 1964, with Sáná fell in the background (Photograph Martti Linkola, SUK600:120, CC BY 4.0).

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there were no permanent Sámi houses or other visible markers of occupation. Consequently, different modes of engaging with the environment have laid the historical foundation for ongoing disputes over land use, where traditional Sámi ways and rights of working and living with the land often go unrecognized. This situation illustrates the overlapping and juxtaposing geographies experienced by different groups who coexist but do not necessarily meet in these parts of Finland (Heikkinen 2002, 2021).

To reindeer herders, places are also mobile, fluid, and experienced on the move. For instance, Lake Čáhkáljávri gárdi is just one in a series of calf ear-marking sites used by Juha's family over time. Each site was utilized for a decade or two, and as the area became untidy and resources were depleted, the site was relocated within the same general vicinity. The history of these movements illustrates the spatial and temporal flexibility of Sámi land use, common law, and landscape perception and practice. In this system, all places and taskscapes are relationally linked and contribute to an interconnected herder home landscape (Länsman 2004:99). As the need arises, former habitation sites, or *báiki*, which include visible dwelling and storage structures, can easily transform into *meahcci*. This term shares the same etymological root as the Finnish words *metsä* [forest] and *metsästys* [hunting] and can be fluidly defined as foraging spaces with overlapping taskscapes used for various wilderness-based activities, such as reindeer herding [*boazomeahcci*], cloudberry-picking [*luomemeahcci*], or fishing [*guollemeahcci*] (Joks et al. 2020; Länsman 2004:99; Schanche 2002).

Point 4: River Másetjohka *Gieddi*

As we continued across the Márjjajohka stream, the footpath veered toward Lake Čáhkáljávri, and soon we encountered another small stream, Másetjohka, which flows down from Lake Másetjavri. This route is popular among hiking tourists and fishermen heading toward Finland's highest peak, Háldi. The area around Másetjohka is unlikely to attract special attention from most hikers, yet if one steps into a patch of visibly greener and lusher vegetation, the wooden posts of a *lávvu*—a tepee-like Sámi tent—come into view. While the place may not look like much, it is a complex of invisible or inconspicuous sites where Juha's personal and family histories are entangled with the deeper Sámi past and the landscape.

The wooden skeleton of the *lávvu* still stands at the site, though it has not been actively used since the 1990s, when Juha's tourism business brought groups of visitors here, including politicians and scientists. In this way, tourism serves as a way for the Sámi to have an impact through an influential international elite (including the co-authors of this article). This site became known nationally as "Tsahkalin laavu" (Fig. 5). As previously mentioned, like many other reindeer herders, Juha and his family have long been involved in the tourism business. However, their approach has always sought to build on Sámi culture and the reindeer herder way of life, which is quite different from the prevalent nature-based tourism in the region. In other words, it is not the type of generic tourism that often leads to friction and contestation; rather, it is locally built cultural tourism, rooted in particular ways of perceiving and engaging with the environment.

Figure 5. Juha narrates landscape histories in front of the skeleton of his family's old lávvu at the Másetjohka River *gieddi* (Photograph Heikknen 2020).

For example, the predominant form of nature tourism in Gilbbesjávri views local environments as "natural" landscapes without history and constructed organically. This mindset marginalizes the people who have inhabited these environments for generations, shaping their taskscapes. Tourism involves distinct mobilities, just as Sámi lifeways and worldviews revolve around circulation and movement; tourists move "on" the world, while the Sámi move in, through, and with it (see, e.g., Basso 1996; Turnbull 2009; Standfield 2018). Thus, both tourism and reindeer herding, as ways of life, are not just about the immediate use of the land; they evoke deeper tensions at a cosmological level, shaped by the attitudes, perceptions, and practices of mobility, as well as the histories and meanings embedded in the land. It is telling that reindeer herders humorously refer to hikers as people engaged in "pointless walking."

The rich histories of the area around the Másetjohka stream began to unfold as we engaged

Figure 6. A modern tent site featuring a bearpmet hearth with wooden "arms" marking the entrance and the skeleton of another lávvu in the background at a seasonal herding site near Lake Másetjávri (Photograph Seitsonen 2019).

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with it closely, even intimately, with Juha as our guide. In the 1960s, this was his family's summer camp (*gieddi*), with tents pitched on both sides of the stream. It was also here that Juha began herding reindeer at the age of 12, when a twig fence was built along Másetjohka to guide the circulation of the animals between the open alpine tundra and the *jassa* (Fi. *jasa*) snow patches. These patches are important because they offer refuge from the overabundance of insects and parasites in the summer while also flushing the pastures that grow below them around the clock, thanks to the Arctic's midnight sun (Bevanger and Jordhøy 2004).

Walking around the *gieddi*, we saw that the lone *lávvu* structure now standing at the site had been preceded by many others, with numerous stone-built hearths, *árran*, identifiable in the grass. In addition to those dating from the 1960s and 1970s, there are also older ones—typical historical-era *bearpmetárran*, or *bearpmet* hearths, a special type of stone fireplace (Seitsonen and Fjellström 2021). These hearths have been used in this area since the 15th century by Sámi pastoralists migrating through the Gilbbesjávri region (Fjellström et al. 2022; Seitsonen and Viljanmaa 2021). Indeed, some of the Sámi hearths near the Másetjohka *gieddi* date back to about 1,000 years ago (Seitsonen 2020).

Point 5: *Gieddi* and *Sieidi* of the Gova Siida under the Gilbbesjávri Shopping Center

Continuing toward a full circumnavigation of Lake Čáhkáljávri, one passes remnants of past human and non-human activities, including the remains of early household hearths. Beyond a small cluster of recently built wooden tourist huts, the path leads back to the parking lot and the main road, which is buttressed by the modest shopping center known as Kilpishalli, located near Juha's current home. Established in 1993 as a general store of sorts, the center has since expanded to include a restaurant, gas station, grocery store, hiking and sportswear store, and even Alko, Finland's national alcoholic beverage retailing monopoly. Kilpishalli's website describes it as "located . . . in the middle of the most mysterious and mystical Lapland" (www.kilpishalli.fi). While this description sounds intriguing, it is at odds with the reality of what is, effectively, a very basic and nondescript shopping center. Moreover, it masks the irony that the complex's initial construction in the early 1990s eradicated a sacred site—a *sieidi* stone—of the Gova Siida.

This place marked a seasonal campsite of the Gova Siida, in use until the 1960s, and was located just behind the modern shops. It had been used regularly by siida members as a campsite during their migration with their reindeer from winter pastures, situated some 100 km to the south, on their way to the northern summer pastures. At the center of the site was a large, dark boulder that served as a sacrificial *sieidi* stone for the Gova Siida and was destroyed during the construction of residential buildings for shop employees. For centuries, *sieidi* have been—and still are—important to Sámi spirituality, marking special places in the landscape (Äikäs 2015; Salmi et al. 2018). There is a striking contrast between the historical and cosmological significance of this site for Juha's family and the banality of the shopping center that now occupies it—even as the center promotes itself with Sápmi/Lapland mysticism and caters to tourists seeking the very same.

This location and its history exemplify both the literal and figurative invisibility of Sámi pasts in the landscape that is their home. It also throws into relief how the worlds of the Sámi and the Finns who settled in Gilbbesjávri, though geographically overlapping, remain, in many ways, worlds apart. Finns and other Europeans have long been fascinated by—and have appropriated and consumed—Sámi spiritualities, which are deeply tied to the land and intertwined with living alongside its myriad (more-or-less human-like) non-human beings. *Sieidi* sites and shaman drums have been at the heart of non-Sámi fascination with Sámi spirituality (Äikäs 2015). Since the 17th century, these sites have been associated with witchcraft, leading to the religious persecution of the Sámi and the destruction of both *sieidi* sites and drums. Yet, *sieidi* and shaman drums—both mediums for communication with invisible worlds and beings—are profoundly personal or familial

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matters. They represent a "secret" aspect of Sámi engagement with the landscape that is traditionally considered off-limits to outsiders (Rydving 2010). This interest has also led to the latter-day colonialist exploitation of the Sámi for scientific purposes (see, e.g., Nylander 2023; Ojala and Nordin 2015). We acknowledge that, as non-Indigenous researchers, we too are part of this colonial history and present—through the very act of writing this article.

This leads to a disturbing contradiction. On the one hand, several historic *sieidi* sites are registered as heritage sites, making them "public" and national heritage. On the other hand, personal *sieidi* sites—unless explicitly protected—can easily be rendered invisible and nonchalantly destroyed, as was the case with Kilpishalli. In fact, many outsiders are more likely to be captivated by a "monumental" landscape than by the ephemeral, fleeting material traces embedded and hidden within it (Fig. 7). Whether these act of erasure were intentional or not, they still serve as another illustrative example of the "worlds apart" within Gilbbesjávri. The eradication of the Sámi site and *sieidi* at Kilpishalli recalls the fate of the Juuso *gieddi*, now buried beneath the visitor-center parking lot, from which we began our walk around Lake Čáhkáljávri. Metaphorically, this succinctly captures the nonexistence of Sámi pasts and presents them in their own ancestral landscapes, increasingly transformed by the growth of tourism infrastructures and services that largely overlook and render invisible the historical cultural landscapes of the Sámi, which predate the establishment of the Finnish community (Alariesto 2021; Olsen 2017). Scholars have long discussed how the politics of erasure—particularly in Indigenous contexts and in relation to decolonization—demonstrates how Indigenous memory is swiftly marginalized in public heritage narratives (Smith 2006; see also Rydving 2010).

Figure 7. Reindeer herder's lávvu tents at the Másetjohka River gieddi in 1963, with Sáná fell in the background (Martti Linkola, SUK600:516, CC BY 4.0).

Our walk ended a stone's throw away from Juha's current house, the starting point of our circumnavigation. Along the way, we traversed not only the physical landscape but also the life of Juha and his family, retracing how their history has unfolded over generations in this landscape, imprinting itself upon it, both tangibly and intangibly. The walk resonated with—and in a symbolic sense, replicated—the cycles of daily and annual life of Sámi herders: the circular daily movements of reindeer on their summer pastures; the perennial mobilities of herder families as they moved with their herds between summer and winter pastures; and the Sámi traditional, cyclical concept of time, tied to the eight seasons of Sápmi, which intertwines the rhythm of human and animal lives (e.g., Gaski 2003; Helander 2000; Näkkäläjärvi 2000).

Understanding these cyclical movements and the external actions that shape and limit them is essential to any effort to appreciate and approach local land-use issues and disputes. It must also be an integral part of any attempt to resolve them. The walk illustrated how, both literally and figuratively, a map does not represent the territory—and how this misrepresentation hinders the recognition of Indigenous pasts and present realities, including land rights claims, which in the Gilbbesjávri region (as in other parts of Sápmi) often crystallize in conflicts over reindeer herding.

Conclusion: Walking Past, the Walked Past

Moving is not just about moving—or rather, it is about more than just movement. While moving does involve physical displacement from one point to another, each act of mobility, whether individual or collective, holds a wealth of meaning. Walking, as a common form of human movement, is not merely a practice of mobility in which each foot is lifted and set down in turn at a regular pace. It is a mode of active, intentional, measured, and often quite slow engagement with the land (see also Graves-Brown and Schofield 2019). Walking often accompanies other activities: thinking (reflecting, pondering, scenario modeling, problem-solving); listening (to the environment, to

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one's bodily processes, to music); talking (typically with another person, though sometimes to oneself); and, of course, moving one's arms and gesticulating. The connection between mobile feet and a productive brain is hardly coincidental, as thinkers such as Hippocrates, Darwin, and Nietzsche—reputedly obsessive walkers—have long recognized (Jabr 2014; Keinänen 2016). Indeed, the relationship between body and brain—the simultaneous act of walking and neural activity—explains why walking, both as an object of study and as an innovative method for gathering data and carrying out research, has gained increasing attention in the social and human sciences over the past two decades (e.g., Ingold and Vergunst 2006; Moles 2008). It is the sensate and kinaesthetic attributes of walking that stimulate cerebral and neural connections, accessing lived experiences, memories, relationships, and both individual and communal identities (O'Neill and Roberts 2020). These qualities make walking an effective tool for exploring social and environmental issues, especially those that demand critical reflection on humanity's manifold relationships with the natural world, environmental challenges, and each other (Aldred 2021).

It is this last connection—the link between humans—that has been most significant for us in this intervention. Our walk with Juha Tornensis around Lake Čáhkáljávri took us past and through overlapping, interlocked, and intersubjective histories that spanned the immediate physical area, the community, the larger region, and even the Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian states and nations more broadly. These histories were simultaneously always present—embedded in people's memories and bodies, in discourse and debate, and through current policy and planning—and yet almost or already invisible or erased—from the landscape, history books, and the memories of others.

For Juha, the lake itself was both a cartographically pinpointed (representational) entity and a present, tangible (physical) demarcation of a lifetime's worth of experience and learned tasksscapes. Engaging with the lake in the present moment allowed Juha to express his thoughts to us in concrete ways since what he saw on a map was an ontologically meaningless flat drawing—one better suited for tourists. For us four researchers, it became more than just a means of seeing, experiencing, and feeling what Juha saw, experienced, and felt. It was also an opportunity to gain a fuller, more balanced, and integrated understanding of the lived and living landscape of people and communities that no longer inhabit the landscape in the same way or configuration. Our aim and experience were perhaps not unlike what many classical anthropologists have long sought from their interlocutors: the chance to see and understand the world from another's point of view through a shared intersubjective experience (Geertz 1974; Rabinow 1977).

However, in the case of Gilbbesjávri, there was more at play than our desire to try another perspective on for size. Walking became, for us, a method for connecting and reconnecting with a landscape and its history; the "walked past" became a means of reclaiming lost or marginalized Indigenous heritage. The dynamic, contested, and relational nature of heritage has been explored by scholars who examine the interplay between memory, landscape, and identity politics—particularly in Indigenous contexts—to show how the erasure of heritage is both a symptom and a tool of broader power imbalances (Lowenthal 1999). The land along the lake that we walked facilitated modes of connection that made such understandings possible.

The land we walked was connective in multiple ways. It connected Juha, through the present, to the pasts of his family and his community. It connected us to Juha, and it connected all of us to this landscape we were in, a landscape we were seeking to better comprehend and more fully "see." The five specific axes we have highlighted in this paper to illustrate this connective seeing emerged through both walking the walk and (or while) talking the talk. We need land to walk on, and we need land to connect us to other patches of land and resources. But do we need to *be in* the land to connect to others and to other relations?

Connectivity has become one of the most widely discussed concepts in recent years in the social and ecological sciences (Sheaves 2009). The concept has been elaborated in multifarious ways by scholars across disciplines and used to spatiotemporally theorize a wide range of phenomena, from globalization (Tellmann et al. 2012) to materiality (Schorch et al. 2019) and wildlife corridors (Anderson and Jenkins 2006). However, social and natural scientists tend to think and write about connectivity in distinct ways. For example, human geographers often focus on emotional connections between people and the natural world, while biogeographers describe ecological interactions among habitats—examining the connections between physical, chemical, and biological processes and different ecosystems, and the degree to which an environment or terrain facilitates or impedes the movement of species and the flow of natural processes among the planet's resources (Taylor et al. 1993). As Hodgetts (2017) explains, the ambiguity that arises in discussions of these different forms of connectivity stems from the fact that, while they are both seen as connective, they sometimes are (or should be) understood as entirely separate and distinct entities. To address this, Hodgetts suggests that connectivity might best be described as multiple, a concept that allows for

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several distinct realities that are not fragmented but "hang together" (Mol 2002:55). These multiple forms of connectivity have significant implications for how humans understand and engage with "natures"—human or otherwise (Hodgetts 2017:83).

Reflecting on our journey through Gilbbesjávri, we found that moving by foot along paths, trails, and routes rich with meaning can reveal traces of history, memory, and cultural practices. In doing so, the walker encounters not just the present environment but also vestiges of past events, traditions, and even erased sites of meaning and memory. It is perhaps important to underscore that our discussion of the "walked past" and the act of "walking past" operates on both literal and metaphorical levels. Literally, our walk with Juha allowed us to physically trace the contours of a landscape layered with history, memory, and contested heritage, revealing both tangible traces of past human activity and sites of erasure. Metaphorically, the act of walking served as a means of reactivating and reinterpreting the past. Walking past became a dynamic process through which heritage is not statically preserved but continuously reconstituted through embodied experience. Walking past a past, one engages with the layers of history imprinted on the landscape—whether through visible monuments or subtle, almost invisible traces left by previous generations. In this sense, to "walk past" is to engage in a dynamic dialogue with the landscape, where each step reconnects one with histories often hidden or marginalized. This duality challenges conventional notions of heritage and landscape as fixed and static, inviting us to view them instead as fluid, lived phenomena that are encountered and reshaped through movement.

The Čáhkáljávri walk, and the thinking it has since inspired, also prompted several other important considerations for scientific investigation into land, landscape, and the relationships that bind these to human social life: the use of maps and cartography in land-use conflicts, the role of historical memory in landscape preservation, possible transdisciplinary approaches to conservation, and various ethical frameworks for participatory research. For example, when Juha approached our university department after meeting with municipal leaders, he was initiating a critique through participatory research (see, e.g., Frideres 1992). The "top down" science-society structures that characterize many uses of participatory action research (PAR)—particularly but not exclusively in the Global South—typically lead to a particular permutation of relations: scholars descend on a field site or community based on a perceived need, ask locals about issues they are facing, construct research questions around their responses, and then begin the formal research process (Bernard and Gravlee 2014). In contrast, our participatory engagement with Juha did not evolve in a purely organic fashion; it was initiated by Juha himself. Though it stemmed from a long-standing relationship of trust with one of the researchers in our group, this form of research highlights a path toward participatory work—one where researchers engage in more substantial, respectful, equitable, and sustainable dialogue with communities. This approach challenges the normative relationship structures that frame locals as "providers" of data and scientists as "collectors," which can perpetuate extractive relationships and hinder efforts to decolonize research with Indigenous participants (Doering et al. 2022; Herrmann et al. 2023). Future research could benefit from exploring other non-normative examples and practices of participatory research, which could help expand how scientists collaborate with stakeholders toward realizing shared goals more effectively and equitably.

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