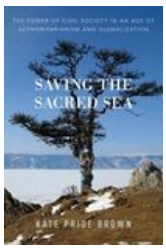

Saving the Sacred Sea: The Power of Civil Society in an Age of Authoritarianism and Globalization

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CHAPTER

4 A Tale of Two Lakes

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Abstract

Villagers around Lake Baikal are known for their doubt, suspicion, apathy, and resistance to change. When activists from Baikal Environmental Wave seek to engage them, they put on a display of disinterest and non-involvement. But when the same organization conducts a series of webinars between these villagers and activists at Lake Tahoe in California, the people become increasingly enthusiastic and involved. This suggests that transnational activism can help break down mental barriers that come from domestic conditions that inspire fatalism. "Defamiliarization" helps locals see their own circumstances in a new light. However, expectations can dampen the experience of defamiliarization, and insincerity in collaboration can result in disappointment and disillusionment. Nevertheless, through defamiliarization, globalization can help augment civil society's power, which is directly drawn from voluntary public engagement.

Keywords: transnational activism, best practices, webinar, sister city, defamiliarization, Baikal, Tahoe

Subject: Social Movements and Social Change, Political Sociology

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Among the goals of transnational activism is the sharing of "best practices," which are methods or templates for action that have repeatedly proven successful (cf. European Commission 2014). The hope is that, in sharing best practices, weaker, younger, or less experienced organizations can avoid the pitfalls of trial and error, and in so doing, more quickly establish themselves and achieve their ends. But good intentions do not necessarily produce good results. Scholarly investigation into the sharing of best practices has yielded important criticisms. At the extreme, the best practice paradigm has been accused of foisting particular structural conditions on the Global South that are conducive to Western neo-imperialism (Goldman 2001, 2007). But more often, best practices are faulted for ignoring local conditions and imposing cookie-cutter answers to contextual problems that often require more subtlety in their solution (e.g., Wareham and Gerrits 1999).

This chapter examines an attempt at the sharing of best practices between communities around Lake Tahoe and Lake Baikal. While these two lakes have a historical relationship and have been designated "sisters," their

differences far exceed their similarities. Replicating Tahoe's success at Baikal may be quixotic, given their unique and divergent contexts. Such an interpretation of events supports the critical literature on transnational NGO collaboration. However, the attempt to share "best practices" transnationally has a major, if frequently unacknowledged, *unintentional* effect, beyond activists' stated goals. Namely, transnational interaction has the opportunity to change how people think. Cooperation across borders may help participants to overcome entrenched fatalism and increase faith in the power of ordinary people to promote social change.

No particular method or skillset was actively diffused through the interchange between Tahoe and Baikal. What did change was how local residents around Baikal thought about their own circumstances and efficacy. Transnational collaboration helped to create the "cosmopolitan vision" (Beck 2006) in the most remote of
p. 77 places. Russian villagers, who prided themselves ↳ on skepticism, and whose social imagination ran up against the barriers of the tried and true, experienced a small mental shift when brought into contact with activists abroad. By their exposure to a different culture and to a milieu that respected progressive thought, Russian villagers expanded their sense of what was possible. In a country with weak civil society (Howard 2003) and a highly skeptical public (Mishler and Rose 2005; Goodwin and Allen 2006), transnational exchange created the space to imagine alternatives. Civic engagement, which had previously been eschewed, was brought into the realm of possibility.

There are limitations on the extent to which such a mental shift may take place. It does not automatically arise in every transnational interaction, nor is it necessarily sustained beyond the space of the interactive process. Local conditions necessarily influence the interpretation of the transnational experience. But the possibility has far-reaching implications. Not only is such an effect important in authoritarian regimes where life experience teaches the public to surrender to the will of the state, but it also could have critical consequences for the larger field of power in the era of globalization and authoritarianism. Since the general public's perceived possibility informs their willingness to engage in voluntary action, transnational collaboration has the *potential* to augment civil society's generalizable power.

A Tale of Two Lakes

Lake Tahoe and Lake Baikal sit on opposite sides of the world. And yet, as Chapter 3 shows, there is an invisible tie that binds them, made manifest by the annual migration of young people from one lake to the other through TBI.[1] The connection between Tahoe and Baikal was originally contrived by the founders of TBI: Baikal was a national priority for Russian environmentalists, and, for the purposes of building a cross-cultural cooperative environmental endeavor, their American counterparts in California thought of Tahoe as a lake in their home state that was also both beloved and in need of environmental preservation and rehabilitation.

Once the decision was made to link Tahoe and Baikal, a number of similarities became apparent to justify the selection. First, both lakes were formed through tectonic processes. They are both located in mountainous terrain that hosts many similar flora and fauna, such as coniferous forests, bears, moose, and foxes. Indeed, many TBI participants told me that the lakes are so similar in appearance that they find it difficult to tell which lake is which in their own photographs. Each lake is located on the border of two different governing authorities: Tahoe is split between California and Nevada, while Baikal lies between Irkutsk and Buryatia. Both
p. 78 lakes are prized for their clarity. Both ↳ lakes have seen mining and logging activities in their watersheds, although for Tahoe this threat is now only historical. And both lakes are host to recreational tourism.

At this point the similarities end. Most obviously, Baikal dwarfs Tahoe in size, as it does most lakes on Earth. When comparing the volume of Tahoe to that of Baikal, TBI members hold a golf ball next to a beach ball. Tahoe is small enough in circumference that a car can circumnavigate it in a day, whereas a trek around Baikal is not only impossible by car (because there are no roads around most of it), it would also take several days to travel the eight hundred miles mapping its circumference. The difference in size gives rise to different

environmental hazards. Roads and development have made erosion the chief concern at Tahoe, with silt destroying water clarity and upsetting ecological balance in the relatively shallow body of water. Erosion of Baikal's islands is a problem for its residents (human and nonhuman), but silt has little impact on the mile-deep waters and the lake's profound clarity. Baikal, on the other hand, has been forced to face the hazards of industrial and agricultural effluvia, which Tahoe has never faced. While Tahoe is host to some endemic species, it is not the "Galapagos" that Baikal is, with endemics by the thousand.

In addition to these ecological distinctions, there are still more profound differences in the human societies that surround each body of water. Although both lakes are dotted with cities and towns, the level of development one can expect to find in each location varies dramatically. While there are locals who make Tahoe a permanent home, the lake is better known as a rustic retreat for peripatetic, jet-setting urban elites. Less than an hour from Reno on the Nevada side, and three hours from San Francisco with its major international airport, Tahoe is embedded in a rich network of First-World recreation. Paved and well-maintained highways connect the towns around Lake Tahoe to cosmopolitan capitals, and a steady stream of traffic in both directions renders Tahoe, for all its rustic charm, a place of urbanity. As a vacation home hub for Bay Area residents, real estate around the lake can range from a median of $150,000 in South Lake Tahoe to a median near $630,000 in Incline Village in the north (Carey 2013). The latter also has the notorious distinction of being a tax haven for shell companies and for wealthy Californians, who claim this Nevada address as a permanent residence (Liu 2008). Even in South Lake Tahoe, where the working class congregates and which has a poverty rate close to 20 percent, one can expect a basic level of development, which has become standard in the United States: plumbing, running water, stable electricity connections, Internet hook-ups, central heat and air, gas stations, convenience stores, and grocery stores.

In contrast, the villages and cities surrounding Baikal lack Tahoe's connectedness. There is no quick access from Moscow or St. Petersburg to the shores of Baikal. Most of the population centers along the lake are
p. 79 villages that seem ↳ to have changed little across the decades. Many lack plumbing. In the summer months, electricity is only sporadically available. Accessing villages on Baikal often involves long, bumpy rides in a crowded minibus [*marshrutka*] over dusty roads according to a schedule that can run as infrequently as once or twice a week. Some villages are only accessible by boat. There are two cities on the shore of the lake (Baikalsk and Severobaikalsk), but travel between them takes two full days by train. To live on the shores of Baikal is to be not merely rustic but remote.

Not only do the regions vary considerably in their levels of economic development, they also exist in very different political cultures. Americans have a long history of democracy, civic engagement, and responsive government (Tocqueville 1981). Russians, on the other hand, hold onto certain legacies of Communism and Empire, which range from bureaucracy to corruption. Russians generally have ambivalent feelings about democracy and little faith in their government (e.g., Mishler and Rose 2005; Goodwin and Allen 2006). More often, the state is something that is to be bypassed and avoided. Given their profound economic and political differences, the human ecology of Tahoe and Baikal create two very different and distinct "life-worlds" (Habermas 1981). That they could share common strategies for addressing social problems is perhaps surprising, yet that is just what two local NGOs at each lake aimed to achieve in a joint collaborative project.

A Project for Mutual Assistance

In 2012, the Wave and TBI received funds from the Eurasia Foundation for a year-long project that would link together three communities around Lake Baikal with organizations in South Lake Tahoe for the sharing of best practices and cooperative development. The Wave and TBI planned to reinvigorate the historic relationship between Tahoe and Baikal while conducting research to uncover which local resources could lead to environmentally sustainable development in each of these communities.

The stated purpose of the exchange was for communities that have faced a similar situation—the need to develop sustainably due to their proximity to a protected lake—to share best practices. The grant application states that the project's goal is "to form mechanisms for international mutual assistance for local communities, facing complex socio-ecological and economic conditions, through a vision of sustainable development in communities based in preserving the eco-systemic condition of two lakes—Lake Baikal in Russia, and Lake Tahoe in the United States." The language of the grant suggests cooperation and the exchange of information and expertise.

p. 80 In this endeavor, TBI and the Wave were enacting a strategy for development that has become paradigmatic among the nonprofit community in the West and among transnational activist networks. As problems have become globalized, so too have attempts to solve them (Smith 2008). There is a strong desire to find what works and to share that knowledge with others in the hope that they can replicate past success (Seidman 2007). The evidence of transnational sharing of practices can be found in the "isomorphism" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) that replicates similar norms across the globe, in policy and practice (cf. Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007). Scholars have shown that NGOs are as responsible as global business or national governments for the growing isomorphism (Schofer 2003; Schofer and Hironaka 2005; Schofer and Meyer 2005). As norms become isomorphic, they then can change the practical strategies of those people whom NGOs aim to serve, furthering the hegemony that Western organizations themselves began (Elyachar 2006). Activists have encouraged the spread of certain "best practices" for labor and environmental standards among businesses worldwide, through a wide array of strategies and tactics (Blair and Palpacuer 2012).

However, there is a growing concern among scholars that what is commonly deemed a "best practice" may fail in ways that are culturally specific, or that they may be even transnationally coercive. AIDS advocacy organizations in Ghana that attempted to follow the successful media campaigns of Western nations could not convey their message in a built urban environment that differed from that of the United States and Europe (McDonnell 2010). Attempts to provide clean drinking water in the Global South effectively restructure national governments and local institutions toward openness to Western corporations (Goldman 2001, 2007). Whether the problem is Western neo-imperialism or simply contextual ignorance of local processes, there is a growing concern that "sharing best practices" may not be a particularly useful practice in itself.

This chapter evaluates an attempt at transnational development work in accordance with the goal of mutual assistance—and shows the shortcomings of sharing strategies irrespective of contextual differences. However, the attempt to unite communities of difference for mutual assistance has an arguably beneficial, yet wholly unintentional, side effect that is potentially more profound than the sharing of best practices itself might have been. Despite the failure to transfer a "best practice" from one place to another, the very practice of sharing can potentially open minds to new possibilities and new terrains of imagination. Certainly, this outcome is not guaranteed. There are potential pitfalls to the self-same strategy: the interaction may result in disappointment and disillusionment. And local conditions may work against the effect produced. But in studies of transnational encounters, the opportunity that collaboration provides to reimagine one's own circumstances is often ignored.
p. 81 The ↳ expanded horizon it provides may be a worthy end in its own right, beyond any particular "best practice" conveyed.

The Wave-TBI project for mutual assistance was primarily devised and developed by Marina Rikhvanova at Baikal Environmental Wave, and it was clear that her own hope in the cross-national component was to encourage Baikalsk and the villages of Goloustnoye (Boshoe and Maloye[2]) to emulate South Lake Tahoe and its success in fostering sustainable geo-tourism. When I first discussed the project with her, as it was just getting started, Rikhvanova explained it this way:

> **Marina Rikhvanova:** People in Baikalsk are very concerned about the paper mill closing because it has been the center of their economy. But Bolshoye and Maloye Goloustnoye had a similar situation. Most people worked for the *leskhoz* [state forestry company] that operated in that region. But when

> the national park formed, it became illegal to harvest wood in the territory of the park. The *leskhoz* had to scale back and many people were laid off. People in these towns generally think that a good job is a job in a big factory, like the *leskhoz* or the paper mill. They often don't see the resources and the potential that they have to develop economically in their region without some big industry. But in Tahoe, they have an economy built around tourism. They have managed to protect their lake and their forests, and they still develop economically.

For Rikhvanova, Tahoe is a success story. Her aim in connecting the towns around Lake Baikal to groups in Tahoe was education and emulation. Tahoe had things to teach Baikalsk and the Goloustnoye villages about the economics of sustainable tourism. Over the decades, Lake Tahoe had recovered from environmental degradation while maintaining economic viability. Residents living near Baikal needed to hear that such an outcome was possible and learn how it could be done.

But before they could connect these Russian sites to Tahoe to discuss mutual problems, they needed to find out what those problems were. First, the Wave needed to engage the public on its own. The environmental organization in Irkutsk sought to mobilize villagers of Bolshoye Goloustnoye to protect themselves and the environment from external efforts at development. The Wave conducted a series of field excursions to Bolshoye and Maloye Goloustnoye to encourage involvement, but their efforts repeatedly ran ashore in the face of village intransigence and a general pessimism about the possibility of change. Despite the Wave's repeated efforts, the villagers remained solidly cynical and fundamentally fatalistic, generally unwilling to get involved.

p. 82

Cultivated Disinterest in Bolshoye Goloustnoye

There was a reason that the Wave was so interested in this one small village of six hundred people. The Irkutsk *oblast* [region] was in the process of setting up two special economic zones (SEZ) on the shore of Baikal. The SEZ would be an area where developers and investors could receive tax breaks and other incentives for establishing tourism and recreation enterprises in the region. Bolshoye Goloustnoye was one suggested site for the SEZ, and the Wave wanted to make sure that villagers' interests were represented in the process. They generally feared that SEZ-sponsored tourism would be environmentally harmful rather than sustainable, and they hoped that Bolshoye Goloustnoye villagers would work with them to ensure that outside developers would not run roughshod over Baikal and its indigenous people. Villagers were aware of the planned SEZ. They were told that it would bring running water and a sewer system to the village, which sounded quite nice from their point of view. Mostly, they were irritated that the land that was slated for development—which, when "seeing like a state" (Scott 1998), looked like empty space—was actually prime grazing land for the village cattle. The SEZ would essentially be enclosing the commons.[3] While activists and capitalists disputed the best means for economic growth, the people of Bolshoye Goloustnoye simply wanted to know where they could feed their livestock. The Wave looked with foreboding at big business's appropriation of local livelihood, and they wanted to assist the residents in finding a secure path forward in this brave new world.

In September 2012, the Wave made a research expedition to Bolshoye Goloustnoye, and I followed to observe the process. Bolshoye Goloustnoye is a village of about six hundred people on the shore of Lake Baikal, approximately two hours from the regional capital city, Irkutsk, by minibus along a bumpy, dusty, tortuous road. I traveled there with Artur, a thin, taciturn man with dark hair, a short beard, and piercing blue eyes. With us was Tanya, a sociologist that the Wave had contracted to perform the focus groups and interviews. The country road to the village of Bolshoye Goloustnoye was beautiful, with rocky cliffs rising up on either side. The road would often follow the small Goloustnoye River, and the autumn leaves that adorned the surrounding trees were golden.

The van lumbered along the winding road, lifting over one of the high hills and then descending into the river delta that opened out onto the shore of Lake Baikal. Nestled beside the delta, in a wide valley of steppe, sat the village of Bolshoye Goloustnoye (Figs. 4.1 and 4.2). The town was mostly made up of wooden, one-story houses, often with outhouses and small agricultural plots beside them, surrounded by wooden fences. Painted
p. 83 crenulations adorned some of the windows and eaves, in traditional Siberian fashion, but such sporadic ↳

p. 84 ↳
decoration did little to mitigate the general dilapidated ambience of a village that mostly survives on subsistence agriculture. Cattle and stray dogs roamed freely on the dirt roads, and children would ride along among them on bicycles, sometimes with another child sitting on the handlebars or perched on the back.

Figure 4.1 The village of Bolshoye Goloustnoye, population 600, on the shores of Lake Baikal.

Photo Credit: Author

Figure 4.2 A very young resident of Bolshoye Goloustnoye.

Photo Credit: Author

The Wave planned to conduct two focus groups and a community meeting over the course of several days in the village. The first focus group was to take place among students in the oldest grades at the local school (8th and 9th graders; those wishing to complete their high school diploma must travel to Irkutsk to do so). Since many villages in Russia currently face the problem of depopulation, the Wave hoped to learn from the students themselves what they liked and disliked about village life, and whether they planned to return to Bolshoye Goloustnoye after completing their education.

The schoolhouse had several classrooms, each imbued with a homey feel. The walls were wood-paneled, with floor-to-ceiling windows to allow in the natural light. Back walls were adorned in potted plants. Students—boys and girls—sat in their white and grey uniforms; most were alert, with straight backs and pleasant expressions, eager to please their out-of-town guests.

The focus group proceeded, and the students described the positive aspects of village life: being close to nature, on the shore of Baikal, with fresh air and homegrown food. Most still planned to leave the village, saying that there was nothing to do and nowhere to work. Among their chief complaints, one that was also repeated frequently by adults in interviews, was the lack of a preschool in the village. When students brought up the fact that Bolshoye Goloustnoye had no preschool, Tanya asked the students whether there was anything they themselves could do to fix the problem.

> "No," several answered, shaking their heads.
>
> "The administration [government] should do something about it," said a girl in a grey jumper, sitting in the front row.

When we left the school, it was obvious that Artur was in an irritable mood. The school housed the only computer in the village, which had a slow, dial-up Internet connection. Artur told the principal he planned to keep her informed as the project developed and to invite her, the faculty, and the students to future events that the Wave planned to hold. He asked for an e-mail address where he could contact them. Artur had also explained to the principal that the Wave would be building an interactive website where people living near Baikal and Tahoe could communicate with one another to share best practices and to mutually solve local

p. 85 problems. The principal replied that she did ↳ not have an e-mail address and that she did not see the point of an interactive Internet site.

> "How can I help them develop if they themselves don't want to develop?" Artur asked rhetorically, in a huff. "How can you not want to use the Internet?"
>
> Tanya countered that she herself did not own a television, but Artur dismissed the comparison. "A television is just a television, but the Internet . . . !"

In the evening, we headed toward the village clubhouse for the adult focus group. Artur and Tanya had been on the phone for the past several days recruiting participants. Tanya wanted a minimum of ten people to attend. Tanya said, while we walked down the dirt road, that she hoped the turnout would be better than it had been at the neighboring village, Maloye Goloustnoye, the previous week, when only five people attended. She went on to criticize the villagers as *sovki*—those Russians who are trapped in a Soviet mentality, who expect the government to do everything and show no personal initiative.

> **Tanya:** There was a villager in Maloye Goloustnoye who complained that the fences had not been painted in thirty years . . . So no one has painted the fences—then paint them! They expect everything to be done for them. And that is how it was in the Soviet Union. There was the *leskhoz* [state logging company], and it provided people with homes, it built the school, it gave people vacations. So people came to depend upon the company. It was the whole life of the town, and then it just vanished. The *leskhoz* probably built that fence thirty years ago, painted it, and since the *leskhoz* shut down, no one has touched it.[4]

We arrived at the clubhouse, which was a long wooden building, painted in fading blue and green. Although it was almost 5:00 p.m., when the focus group should begin, the building was still locked. Only one of the invited participants showed up to wait with us by the front door. A town magistrate arrived on a motorcycle with her two-year-old daughter tucked into a sidecar. She opened the clubhouse for us and we all went inside.

The interior of the clubhouse was old and dilapidated. We were shown into a very small auditorium that doubled as the local discothèque. It had red plush theater seats lining the outside walls: some missing arms, others missing seats, some with torn upholstery, and all of it dusty and degraded. There was a proscenium and a stage that looked to be about two meters wide and deep.

p. 86 We waited past the 5 p.m. starting time, hoping more people would come. Slowly, a few more trickled in. One woman, a recent retiree with short white hair, kept looking around and wiggling in her seat as though at any minute she might get up and leave. It seemed all she could do to sit there and wait. "How can we just be sitting here when there are potatoes to be dug?," she asked aloud to no one in particular.

Tanya was clearly dissatisfied with the low turnout, but tea and cookies could only occupy the guests for so long, and Artur decided to begin. He made a brief presentation about the project that the Wave was undertaking. I had heard his opening remarks shift over the course of the trip. While he had usually begun in a respectful and upbeat tone to express the Wave's desire to help and support villagers, the resistance he had encountered hardened his approach. Now he stood before them and explained his point of view in no uncertain terms:

> The economy is changing . . . either the village will develop or it will dry up. Usually development happens when some fat cat [*bogataya dyadya*] comes in and pays a ton of money to build something. But we want to know what we can do here with what we have, so that you don't have to wait for the fat cat, who may or may not put money back into the village.

After Artur's introduction, Tanya began her focus group protocol. As the focus group continued, a few more stragglers came in. All told, seven people showed up to the focus group. The last member came thirty minutes into the focus group discussion (and fifty minutes after the originally planned starting time.) She perched on the edge of the chair closest to the door. When Tanya tried to include her in the conversation, she motioned with her hand to suggest that she was only there to observe, not to participate.

Like the youth focus group, there was much complaining about the state of the village, the prospects for development, and a general pessimism about the possibility for improving the situation. The people in attendance had been specifically invited to the focus group because they were considered to be the most "active" members of the community, but even these frequently reverted to a refrain of fatalism.

"The administration doesn't listen to us," said a woman in attendance. "We can't do anything. We are powerless."

The following month, the Wave held another seminar, this time in the neighboring village of Maloye Goloustnoye. The Wave members planned to bring representatives from the Small Business Administration in
p. 87 Irkutsk, the ↳ regional capital, to talk about various programs and opportunities that the villagers could access to help develop small businesses. Villagers from Bolshoye Goloustnoye were also invited to attend the seminar, but all declined.

> "They said it was too cold to wait for the bus," Katya said.
>
> "They have a point," I replied, as the Siberian winter was now in full swing. She shook her head dismissively. "So we offered to have a van pick them up in front of their houses," she went on. "We would drive around to people's doorsteps and collect them from their homes. They wouldn't have to wait outside at all. But they still said no. Now they said it was because the cow had to be milked in the morning."

The activists from Irkutsk and the villagers from Bolshoye Goloustnoye approached the SEZ with decidedly different dispositions, developed in their own unique circumstances. Village "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977) was characterized by fatalism and apathy. Efforts at creating change were viewed with suspicion and doubt. Even the schoolchildren believed that only the government could bring change to the village, as in the case of the nonexistent preschool. Not only were the open meetings poorly attended, but those who did attend put on a display of disinterest: sitting near the door and complaining that they had much better things to do than discuss economic development. They performed cultivated disinterest to communicate to others their savvy and situated knowledge.

In a small rural village under a government that is alternately authoritarian and inept, skepticism about the efficacy of individual initiative cannot be easily faulted. In fact, it is hardly even surprising. Scholars in the mid-twentieth century even presumed that dictatorships arose from a pre-existing authoritarian political culture (Broderson 1957; Kornhauser 1959; in Russia, see Keenan 1986). Others have acknowledged that the relationship between governmental structure and political culture is not causal; rather, the two are adaptive and mutually reinforcing (Lipset 1960; Almond 1983).[5] For the villagers of Bolshoye Goloustnoye, general neglect of their needs and desires, both from the state and the new market economy, has not offered them much to lend credence to the ideology of individual initiative.

The activists from Irkutsk, on the other hand, brought with them different presumptions: rather than seeing change as suspect, they consider it inevitable. For the Wave, one needed to keep one's ear to the ground, to keep an eye out, to protect nature from those who would exploit it for profit. The bustle of modernity requires constant vigilance, and networks of like-minded supporters are an important weapon for countering the
p. 88 agendas of the powerful. What was perhaps most incomprehensible to the urban sensibilities of ↳ Irkutsk's activists was the disinterest their rural counterparts expressed at joining the global march of modernity. There

is probably no tool as emblematic of the cosmopolitan ethos as the Internet, and yet the school principle practically rebuffed it. When discussing the tourist economy in focus groups, most residents viewed tourists with disdain. They were glad of the extra income but expressed displeasure with the myriad ways that tourists disrupted their village life. They would not turn down the opportunity for running water but hoped the price for such luxury would not come at the expense of their daily patterns and practices. Faced with the intransigence of nonparticipation in this rural community, Artur essentially declared to them at the start of the focus group that development was inevitable: modernity was coming to Bolshoye Goloustnoye, whether the villagers wanted it or not. The only question was whether they would be proprietors of their own guesthouses or scrubbing the floors of a large hotel owned by a Moscow oligarch.

The dispositional divide, defined as rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal, or traditional versus modern, plagued the relationship between the Wave and the villagers they sought to recruit and engage. Russian environmental activists were unable to rally Russian villagers. It took a new kind of engagement, in the form of a transnational webinar, to light the spark.

The Sister-City Webinar Project

In January, the Wave and TBI embarked on the second half of their project: a series of webinar sessions to take place between communities in Russia and the United States. The Wave selected two locations for the webinar in Russia: Baikalsk, because of the long campaign against its paper mill, and Bolshoye and Maloye Goloustnoye because of the potential SEZ to be placed nearby. South Lake Tahoe in California would participate because it had a long history in the region as the home of TBI and because it is a designated "sister city" to the city of Baikalsk. Because there was only one computer in Bolshoye Goloustnoye, and the dial-up connection was too slow for video, any interested participants from the Goloustnoye villages had to be picked up in a minivan and driven to the Wave office in Irkutsk for the webinar event. I also attended the first webinar at the Wave office as a participant observer.

February 5, 2013

It was still dark when I arrived at the Wave office at 8:45 a.m. for the very first of the webinar series. Marina and I greeted each other as I shed my layers and hung them on the coat stand.

p. 89 "We have only two people from Bolshoye Goloustnoye and no one from Maloye Goloustnoye," Marina told me, with a grin. I was perplexed as to how I should react, as I often was when Marina would deliver bad news with a cheerful smile. She then directed me to the classroom in the back of the office. I saw a number of chairs set up in a semi-circle facing a computer monitor, with a microphone and speakers attached. There was an embarrassment of staff in the Wave office: three times the number of employees as there were program participants. In addition to the regular Wave staff, two scholars from the Center for Independent Social Research (CISR) were on hand to assist, and a journalist had been recruited to document the event. Marina encouraged everyone to help themselves to the coffee, tea, muffins, and cookies brought for the occasion.

The two guests from Bolshoye Goloustnoye sat in the chairs, facing the computer uncertainly. One was a woman—Zina—in her late sixties probably, with short, spiked white hair. Beside her sat a man named Pyotr who looked to be in his fifties. His long black hair was streaked with grey and pulled back in a ponytail. He had dark rimmed glasses and a goatee.

Olga, a sociologist with CISR, was serving as moderator and translator. She thanked the two from Goloustnoye for coming and explained to them what the webinar would be about. She told them of the similarities between Baikal and Tahoe. "Thousands of people live in Tahoe, and they get millions of tourists. Two million people live

on Baikal, and we get thousands of tourists. But tourism is something that we have in common. So we can talk about tourism here and tourism there."

"It will be interesting to listen to it," Zina told Olga, although she looked very far from interested, her face buried in a gardening tabloid she had brought with her.

"Before we begin, let's talk about the questions that will be raised during the webinar," Olga continued. "What are the key assets or tourist attractions in your region that you can discuss during the webinar?"

The two guests sat mute for a moment. Then Zina shrugged and said, "The Dry Lake."

"What is the Dry Lake?" Olga asked.

"It's a lake in the forest that appears every four years," she answered, and then was silent.

"So, every four years there is a lake. What happens the other three years?" Olga prompted.

"It's just a field."

"So it's pretty?"

"Well, yes, it's pretty."

"Ok. There is the Dry Lake. What else? What other things would attract tourists to Bolshoye Goloustnoye?" Olga asked.

p. 90 "Lake Baikal," Pyotr said. "In the winter, you can ice skate on the lake." Given his prosaic answer, one might have countered that Baikal is not unique to Bolshoye Goloustnoye. Nor did the village have any particular corner on the market for ice skating. Olga's expression and tone suggested disappointment and mild frustration with their disinterest, but she proceeded with the project program and prepared to begin her role as moderator and translator for the Irkutsk site of the webinar.

The Wave had selected Google Plus as the hosting software for the webinar. All three locations could be seen at once as small inset panels at the bottom of the screen, and users could take turns enlarging them to the full screen size. Olga opened the screen from Tahoe, and the two guests from Goloustnoye inhaled sharply.

"So many people!" Zina murmured, and indeed, with about eight attendees, there were noticeably more Americans seated around the table in Tahoe's conference room than in either Irkutsk or Baikalsk, which had two and four people, respectively. There was also a small squeal of delight when one of the Russians noticed a large map of Lake Baikal on the wall of the conference room in Tahoe.

The conversation got started. We began with introductions, going around to each individual at each site. Dialogue was understandably slow, since everything needed to be translated into either English or Russian by the translator that each site had on hand for that purpose. But despite the continuous need for translation, the conversation soon became more involved.

The Tahoe residents came in with an agenda. They had a model of development that they clearly wished to convey. The head of a local nonprofit, a woman with long silver hair, described Tahoe's program for sustainable tourism.

"Our region is embracing geo-tourism as a way of life," she explained, without defining what geo-tourism is.[6] "First, you have to identify those assets that are unique to your area." Here she produced a map of Tahoe with several points indicated upon it. "Then we develop these places on the ground, so we can show tourists these particular places." Here, she showed information about a number of "adventure tracks" that had been developed for tourists to follow. "We use a trinomic model in developing these tracks that includes social

organizations, private businesses, and the government. Nonprofit organizations host the adventure and provide the guides, the state provides access to these special places, and then the local businesses benefit by providing the food, equipment, and transportation. And everything we use in an 'adventure track' showcases the local—it's all local. Local food, local transportation, local kayaks, local businesses, local biologists. Everything is here. Nothing is imported. There are no cars [involved]."

While she listened to the accented Russian proceeding from the translator in Tahoe, Zina nodded her head
p. 91 vigorously. "Visitors have incredible ↳ experiences," the woman in Tahoe went on. "It's fun, it's educational, and it's low-carbon . . . It's sustainable."

Next, the conversation turned toward tourism potential in Baikalsk. There was a doctor in attendance, employed by the local ski resort, who harbored dreams of developing medical tourism in Baikalsk through alternative spa therapies. The Baikal watershed is seismic, with hot springs throughout the region. This doctor planned to develop thermal springs therapy and blue clay spa treatments with local muds in Baikalsk. He presented this as a means to sustain tourism outside of the regular ski season, but noted that it would be a major economic undertaking and would require a great deal of collaboration and capital to succeed.

After hearing about the well-developed program of adventure tracks in Tahoe, and a thermal spa in Baikalsk, it was time for the two villagers from Bolshoye Goloustnoye to speak of their own tourist attractions. They spoke of the Dry Lake and the skating trails, as they had with Olga before the webinar; however, this time they did so with more enthusiasm. Zina described the Lake as a magical, mysterious place that everyone should come and see. She talked about its healing properties and the legends surrounding it. She seemed to think the site more worthy now than before the webinar. Pyotr talked positively about the idea of creating an ice skating trail, and continued to speak about the potential of ice skating tracks even after the conversation had turned to the difficulties of tourism and the problems it can bring. Their pessimism had morphed into interest, positivity, and participation.

The conversation proceeded nicely until this point, and it seemed that the three sites were glad to listen to one another's issues and ideas. But discussion then took a sudden turn for the worse. One of the predesignated questions asked each community to discuss various environmentally friendly technologies that they used in tourism, and the drawback to cross-national collaboration became immediately apparent.

"Embassy Suites is a four-hundred-room hotel in South Lake Tahoe," explained one of the community leaders there. "They managed to cut costs by $500,000 per year based upon environmental upgrades." She explained that the hotel now composts all its food waste, and how it instituted a recycle-reuse program that helped save money.

"But one of their biggest expenses was laundry," the woman went on. "So they bought new, efficient, ion cleaners, which are modern washing machines that use little energy, little water, and no soap. They use no soap and no dryers!"

The participants in Russia looked back at the screen blankly. The "best practice" offered by Tahoe in this instance was so divorced from their own experience that the conversation seemed to shrivel and die. The
p. 92 villages of Goloustnoye have no plumbing—the schools and hospital have outhouses. ↳ Washing machines themselves were fanciful, let alone ion cleaners. Even in Baikalsk, which is an industrial city, one can see clothes hanging out to dry in subzero temperatures.

Someone in Baikalsk muttered something about a solar panel somewhere in the city.

"Our technology is simpler," Zina answered when it was her turn to talk about "alternative technologies" in Bolshoye Goloustnoye. "Our leftover food is given to the cattle. And we use only fallen trees for heating the house, rather than cutting trees down."

No one in the webinar was directly helping anyone else at this moment in any way. Bolshoye Goloustnoye had no use for Embassy Suites and its ion cleaners. People in Tahoe only heat their homes with fire for the aesthetic, and they certainly would not be giving food waste to their nonexistent livestock. Baikalsk hovered somewhere in the middle. As a factory town, they had central heating, so felling trees was not a chief concern of theirs. But neither would their solitary solar panel do much to impress the Americans.

To bring the conversation back onto mutual footing, one of the Russians in Baikalsk asked the Tahoe residents to tell him about snowshoeing, which is a sport seldom seen in Russia. The Americans obliged, talking about their adventure tracks and how local businesses will rent out snowshoes.

"What about ice skating in Tahoe?" asked Pyotr, seeking to include Bolshoye Goloustnoye in the conversation.[7]

"Tahoe never freezes," the Americans answered in one voice, resulting in raised eyebrows from the Russians who live by Baikal, where winter ice is more than a meter thick.

"We have ice skating in Truckee," said one woman referring to a city not far from Tahoe. "But it's indoor."

"Come to Bolshoye Goloustnoye!" the two residents invited their foreign correspondents with enthusiasm. "We have the biggest ice skating rink in the world!"

And with this friendly invitation extended, the first international webinar between Baikal and Tahoe drew to a close.

Bolshoye Goloustnoye had a reputation among the Irkutsk activists involved in the project for its passivity and intransigence. Invitations to participate in events were inevitably met with reluctance and questions like: "Why are we having a meeting when the potatoes need to be dug?" or "How can we travel to Irkutsk when the cows must be milked in the morning?" There were a few active members of the community, but the general public in this village of six hundred souls tended to enact an almost ritualized avoidance of involvement. It was that
p. 93 performance of disinterest that brought Zina to press her nose to ↳ her magazine and to tell Olga that the conversation would be interesting "to *listen* to," as though to emphasize that she was there to hear and not to participate. She would attend but keep herself at a distance. Such insouciance is also the likely reason that there were so very few people from Goloustnoye in attendance for the first webinar.

But during the webinar, there was a marked change in the participants from Bolshoye Goloustnoye. Their cultivated disinterest failed them when faced with the active interest of Baikalsk and South Lake Tahoe. In the village, one garners a degree of respectability from suspicion and stubbornness, but during the webinar, respect was conferred on those who were progressive: to those who were attempting to improve their communities—and especially to those who had succeeded in some small way to make change. Suddenly, participants from Bolshoye Goloustnoye felt the need to tout their potential skating trail, to talk about their Dry Lake with more gusto. It was the only thing that saved them from the mortification of having nothing to say when, in a new social milieu, the standard for respectability had shifted dramatically *toward* involvement.

However, the transformation that occurred among the participants in Bolshoye Golousnoe was not merely one of lip service, nor was it solely geared toward saving face, as I thought at first glance. Instead, it seemed that simply being exposed to another context, one where progressive thought was validated, altered the apparent *legitimacy* of activism and community involvement for the villagers. Both participants listened attentively, and Zina would nod her head on occasion, signaling that she heard what the other participants were saying, and that she liked what she heard. By the end of the conversation, both participants from Bolshoye Goloustnoye were fully engaged, offering an enthusiastic farewell.

After the webinar, Zina behaved differently. She had long since tucked her newspaper away, and now she wanted to talk, to work through the ideas and the experience. The two guests from Bolshoye Goloustnoye showed a reluctance to leave the Wave's office after the webinar. They wanted the conversation to keep going

and began telling the staff what they thought of all they had just heard. Indeed, the desire to debrief was so evident that the Wave decided in future webinars to formalize it and hold a post-webinar discussion as part of the process.

Importantly, the effect of this cognitive transformation extended beyond the webinar itself. The sense of interest and efficacy did not stop at the door of the Wave's office. Reports of the webinar spread, and at each subsequent meeting in the series, more and more people were in attendance on the Russian side of the screen. There were six webinars[8] altogether that took place in Irkutsk, Baikalsk, and South Lake Tahoe. Each saw
p. 94 increased attendance on ↳ the Russian side of the screen through the penultimate webinar.[9] Participation rose from two to twelve, and, while a dozen locals may not portend a social revolution, it does represent a sixfold increase over the course of a month, and it was in total opposition to the Wave's previous experience recruiting in Bolshoye Goloustnoye. The growing interest and widening participation suggests that the webinars were moving the thought processes of the villagers toward more willing involvement.

In addition to raising interest in participation, the project also influenced people's sense of efficacy in the face of social problems. The webinars became spaces where stumbling blocks that had seemed insurmountable became collectively conquerable. Once in a mindset of efficacy and agency, problems got solved. During the webinar that discussed poverty, a woman with a guesthouse in Bolshoye Goloustnoye, Galina, talked about putting in a new pit toilet and then being fined 130,000 rubles (US $4,334) because she did not have proper documentation for it. She described her difficulties with the state bureaucracy that regulates business and concluded, saying, "I'll have to work on the black market, because I just can't deal with what it takes to work officially."

This type of comment is common in Russia. Anthropologist Nancy Reis (1997) refers to this discursive category as a "lament." In her ethnography of discourse in the late Soviet period, she documented the cultural tendency to describe at length the problems and difficulties people face, particularly at the hands of an incompetent and unresponsive state. An important quality of the "lament" was its divorce from any discussion of problem *solving*. This litany of suffering was not geared toward finding an avenue to relieve the suffering—it was simply a discursive ritual: to proclaim a lamentation. The lament has continued to persist in Russian culture well past the *perestroika* period wherein Reis documented it, particularly in the smaller towns and villages. Normally, Galina's complaint would have fallen squarely in this tradition.

In the context of the webinar, though, the lament was met with a nontraditional response. The villagers began to try to help her overcome the obstacles she described. They asked her questions about how her business was classified and made recommendations for what she could do. Among those present was a woman from the Irkutsk Small Business Administration, and she passed her card to Galina, saying she would be glad to help her work out her documentation problems and point her in the direction of grants and resources geared toward small entrepreneurs to make the toilet and other improvements more affordable. The two met up and continued talking after the webinar.

In another occurrence, during a post-webinar debriefing, participants from Bolshoye and Maloye Goloustnoye began to discuss about the growing litter problem that has accompanied the rise of Baikal tourism.

p. 95 "I'm ashamed of the mentality in our country," another woman piped in. "We have volunteers come to pick up litter. And not just volunteers: international tourists will pick up litter and bring it to me. But our Russian people just drink and toss the bottle."

Again, despite the tone of the comment, which suggested a lament (and to which the appropriate response is a sad shake of the head, a click of the tongue or another lament), those at the webinar began to think of ways that the problem might be fixed.

"My souvenir shop could start a program: bring a bag of trash and get a free souvenir!"

The webinars provided a space apart from the everyday where possibilities could be envisioned and expanded. In the third webinar on poverty, a woman who owns her own restaurant in Baikalsk attended.

> "We started with four people, and we now employ between seventy and one hundred people, depending on the season. It is hard to do business because of high taxes and expenses, but we pay good salaries. We also do charity work. We built a church with our contributions. We also regularly provide free meals to children in a local school. We are Russian, we are a strong people, and we just have to work [and] to believe in our work."

At the end of this speech, the participants in Irkutsk from Bolshoye and Maloye Goloustnoye burst into applause. They had been listening with rapt attention throughout, exchanging nods or approving glances with every point the speaker raised. They were impressed, not only with the success of the restaurant, but especially with the apparent civic virtue displayed by the local entrepreneur—providing wide employment, with a "good salary," feeding local school children for free, and building a community church.

During the group discussion following the webinar on poverty, the very first comments were about the restaurant.

"Let's organize an exchange so we can meet in person," someone from Bolshoye Goloustnoye said. "At least between us and Baikalsk. We can send delegates there, and they can come here. Especially the woman with the restaurant." The others nodded energetically and added that they also would like the opportunity to see the restaurant and learn more about it. For a population that in previous circumstances would find a multitude of excuses to avoid attending seminars or meetings, it was a radical departure for the same group to suggest such
p. 96 an exchange of their own initiative. For a group that would ↳ often complain of the difficulties in traveling to Irkutsk, or even the next village over, the excitement about a field trip to distant Baikalsk was out of the ordinary.

Why did the webinars succeed in fostering some movement toward participation and problem solving when the Wave's own attempts had not? The crucial difference seems to be the transnational aspect of the project. But is it transnational engagement specifically that causes this change? What was the apparent impact on the Tahoe side of the screen?

Consuming the Other

Not all parties came to the webinar with the same expectations, and these may have conditioned the impact that the webinar had in each community. Social position can temper the outlook of unequal parties in a dialogic exchange. The difference in expectation between participants in Russia and the United States was most evident at the fourth webinar, which covered the topic of food.

When the Tahoe participants discuss food, they are chiefly concerned with issues of environmental protection, and it derives from the American intelligentsia's growing distaste for agribusiness, with its use of chemical pesticides and herbicides and poor treatment of livestock (e.g., Pollan 2006). Moreover, many US environmentalists are worried about the carbon footprint of their diet. "Food miles" is a term used to encompass the distance traveled by the beef or broccoli or rice that ends up on a person's plate (e.g., Weber and Matthews 2008). To counter the negative effects of agribusiness and food mileage, a movement has grown up in cities in the Global North to bring food production closer to home through farmer's markets and community-supported agricultural (CSA) cooperatives. Such were the food concerns that motivated the webinar participants at Lake Tahoe.

Like the United States, Russia also developed a form of industrialized agriculture, but there remains a major difference between the two countries when it comes to the production of food. The practice of domestic agriculture was not lost in the Soviet Union as it was in the United States. Collectivization and food production *po planu* (according to plan as opposed to the market) resulted in problems that ranged in severity from famine to waste, from scarcity to spoilage. To address food problems and to serve as an incentive to Soviet citizen employees, state companies began to distribute a parcel of land to their workers: a *dacha*.[10] Usually an hour or two from the city by commuter rail, these rural plots would host a primitive cabin and garden that would grow flowers, vegetables, berries, and fruits. Soviet Russians would spend their summer evenings and weekends
p. 97 working the land, and the yield would ↳ produce enough both to feed themselves for the summer and to preserve food for the winter.

About 40 percent of urban households possess a dacha (Clarke 2002). Thus, even urban residents maintain the art of subsistence agriculture. Dachas ensured fresh food supply during the vagaries of planned production or periods of economic crisis in the market economy. The extent to which Russians make use of subsistence agriculture generally follows the rise and fall of economic well-being in the country as a whole (Southworth 2006). Residents in Baikalsk and Bolshoye Goloustnoye are no different in this regard. When the paper mill suspended its operations in 2008, many people relied upon selling dacha-grown strawberries[11] on the side of the road for income. While villagers of Bolshoye Goloustnoye had always maintained their own agricultural plots, these were not their main form of subsistence during the Soviet years, when most residents worked for the *leskhoz*. But after Bolshoye Goloutnoe was incorporated into Pribaikalskii National Park, the logging industry shut down, and what had been the villagers' supplementary agriculture became their chief occupation.

When the Russians and the Americans came together to discuss food, their unique national histories limited the kind of assistance that could be offered. The Tahoe interest in food was philanthropic and philosophical, but it was not existential. Their approach to food was that of a conscientious consumer. For the Russians, self-sufficient food production was considered both necessary and good. Given the short growing season, Russians are also accustomed to buying food that has traveled many miles. Any fresh produce purchased in winter has been shipped in from China or Central Asia—and with winters that can reach forty degrees below zero, there is no easy way to shorten those food miles. Instead, Russians emphasize that, while it is necessary to ship food in winter, one's own produce is always preferable.

Given their preoccupation with food miles, the participants in Tahoe began the webinar by stating their desire to grow food in Tahoe and acknowledging the impossibility of such an endeavor. "Almost no one up here grows any food," one Tahoe resident explained. "Quite a few people have tried to grow veggie gardens, but they don't succeed." The residents of Tahoe were convinced that the heavy environmental regulation protecting the lake from erosion and run-off would render domestic agriculture impossible. But they went on to say that Tahoe makes up for this lack with farmer's markets and CSAs, where food only travels fifty to two hundred miles.

Russian participants were pleased to learn about CSAs and ways to organize the sale of rural produce to nearby urban dwellers. However, they also wanted to share their own knowledge of domestic agriculture with the
p. 98 Americans in Tahoe. Russians in both locations talked with enthusiasm about their fresh ↳ eggs, chickens, berries, and vegetables. Residents of Baikalsk even brought examples of fish, nuts, and homemade jams to show proudly to the Americans in Tahoe. They explained how to start seeds indoors in late winter to circumvent the short growing season and how to preserve freshly grown produce to eat in the winter.

One man from Baikalsk discussed his permaculture garden, which he framed as useful to the residents of Tahoe and their environmental difficulties:

> We have the same problems as Tahoe, with little top soil and a cold climate. But I read an American magazine a few years ago about gardening, and there was all this information on permaculture. Now I

> have an organic garden, making use of an organic landscape design. Fruit trees are not common in Siberia, but I have managed to grow apples and pears, apricots and cherries. They produce fruit for us, and more left over, so we can feed our friends. I also use the garden to educate people about organic gardening and permaculture. I invite people from the local campgrounds and hotels. Every year, the students at Tahoe-Baikal Institute come as guests to my house and tour my garden. We also grow saplings and flowers that are used for landscaping in the city. We do all of this organically, and we only have 1/3 of a hectare [less than an acre].

This man combined the Russian tradition of domestic agriculture with ideas on permaculture that he imported from an American magazine. His experimentation had proven successful, and he was eager to share his knowledge and experience with the representatives in Tahoe. However, they did not seem interested in learning from Russia's experience. Despite their rare access to expert domestic gardeners and subsistence farmers in a similar ecosystem, they continued to write off the very possibility of homegrown produce. The usefulness of this best practice was as lost on their sensibilities as ion cleaners had been for the villagers in Russia.

Instead, the food webinar served to reinforce the axiomatic expression of multicultural appreciation: an exchange of recipes. In multicultural America, the exotic is domesticated and incorporated via gastronomy (e.g., Appadurai 1988). Urban dwellers can display their worldliness and tolerance through adventurous cuisine. They can imagine themselves partaking of a culturally authentic experience when ordering Vindaloo or Pad Thai, from the safety of a restaurant that is expressly created for the purpose of Western consumption (Long 2004). So too did the Tahoe residents seek to display their appreciation of Russian culture by reducing it to food. The one question that Tahoe residents asked of Russians with the intention to learn a "best practice" from them
p. 99
was: How do you cook cabbage? "We would like to know how to cook cabbage," a woman in Tahoe ↳ asked. "I think cabbage would grow well here, but Americans don't eat cabbage, mainly because we don't know how to prepare it." Were she ever in Russia as a guest or tourist, she said, she would like to eat Russian cabbage.

The grant project that supported the webinars was based upon the principles of exchange and cooperation. But as the project progressed, it became increasingly evident that the concept of mutual benefit was not itself mutual. American participants were glad to talk about their own work, and they were always glad to hear what their colleagues in Russia were doing. But there seemed to be an implicit expectation that one party was there to provide the best practice, and the other was there to receive it. Whether it was the trinomic model of geo-tourism or the establishment of CSAs, Americans came prepared with programs to impart. There was less evidence that they had any expectation of *receiving* help from Russia. While that may be an accurate assessment, given the different levels of development between the two regions, the very assumption may have forestalled learning; it may have prevented a similar expansion of mental horizons in Tahoe, such as happened in Bolshoye Goloustnoye. While transnational activist collaboration was able to bring to rural villages the experience of cosmopolitanism, the routinization of cosmopolitanism in the developed world prevented them from experiencing the opportunity for wonder that comes with encountering difference.

What Is in It for Them?

While webinar participation in Baikalsk and Irkutsk continued to grow, it was waning in Tahoe. It became clear that the participants on the Tahoe end of the conversation were almost exclusively composed of individuals who spearhead local nonprofit organizations and who were invited to participate for one particular subject of discussion. Certainly the same was true for individuals in the Russian sites as well—the man with the permaculture garden did not come to the food webinar by chance—but there were also those people who kept coming back to the webinars regardless of the subject matter. These were people eager to learn what was going on in other locations and excited or inspired by the ideas that were shared. In Tahoe, it seemed that the only repeat attendees were the organizers from TBI, and this gave the impression that while the Americans were glad to talk about their own programs, they were otherwise uninterested in their sister lake across the ocean. The lack of comparable "repeat attendees" on the American side was noted by Russian participants with concern. Were the Americans engaging in exchange, or was it merely a paternalistic charity they offered, sharing their assumed greater wisdom with their imagined inferiors?

p. 100 The penultimate webinar discussed the problem of retaining young people in the towns, of developing activities and employment opportunities for youth so they would not move away to larger cities. With eleven locals present, this session was the most populated of all the sessions in Baikalsk, and was attended by young people themselves who had learned about the webinar from their teachers or parents. One attendee was a pretty blonde girl in her late teens. In the post-webinar discussion, she said that she wished students in Tahoe had attended the call on the American side so that they could have talked. Everyone else nodded and agreed.

"We had young people here, why didn't they have young people there?" asked one of the adults with a critical tone, who had been a repeat participant in the webinars. "They just brought their NGOs and teachers. If you want to talk about problems of young people, then you have to talk *to* young people."

Again, in the spirit of the webinar and its active, problem-solving, and initiative-seizing ethos, participants began brainstorming ideas to connect young people in Tahoe and Baikalsk. Someone said that a youth exchange should be part of the sister-city relationship. Others thought it would be cheaper to have a display in each of their schools where they could post photos and stories about one other. One popular idea was to have groups of students in each village plant a tree on the same day in honor of each other, then send images and information about the trees back and forth as they grew: that way, students would be caring for nature locally while imagining their brethren globally.

While the post-webinar discussion carried forth the optimism and initiative that the webinar space tended to foster, doubts lingered over whether the wealthy, progressive, democratic Americans were actually interested in their Siberian counterparts, other than as a fleeting curiosity.

February 25–26, 2013

Our hotel in Baikalsk looked like a warehouse from the outside. The inside did little to mitigate the resemblance. The lobby was white and open, only sparsely furnished with a sofa and concierge desk. The lights were kept off in any part of the hotel that was not in use, and the corridor that sank back from the lobby was black and forbidding. After checking in, it was down this corridor we went, stopping at the one door that radiated light from the inside. The room contained four twin beds with mismatched sheets in flamboyant designs.

"Ooo, I want the zebra bed!" Katya announced with enthusiasm, claiming the animal print sheets as her own. The rest of us lumbered in and dropped our belongings. We pulled two chairs together and improvised a table
p. 101 to quickly eat dinner. We had homemade *blini* [Russian pancakes] with ground beef and ↳ rice stuffing, a spicy

carrot salad out of the jar, sesame seed bars, and bread with jam. For dessert, Katya bought cookies that were molded into the form of cats.

"I thought you were a vegetarian," Artur teased her, as she gleefully bit the head off one of them.

It was in this hotel that the Wave was holding a closed meeting in preparation for the last videoconference in the sister-city project. The last webinar was supposed to discuss the "sister-city" relationship between Tahoe and Baikalsk, and how that relationship could be reinvigorated. The Wave invited select individuals who had been active in the formative years of the "sister-city"[12] partnership between South Lake Tahoe and Baikalsk. When visits to Russia were cheap and grant money flowed plentifully to help integrate societies long separated by an Iron Curtain, there were repeated delegations sent in exchange between Tahoe and Baikalsk. The alumni of these various exchanges gathered on the second floor of our small, warehouse-style hotel in Baikalsk to discuss that period of time.

The second-floor lobby where the meeting took place was cold and dimly lit, but was very large with a high ceiling. We set up chairs to form a circle, incorporating the couches and armchairs already in the pink pastel room. Guests started trickling in. There were twelve individuals from Baikalsk, joining Marina Rikhvanova, Katya, and Artur from the Wave. At first there was simply pleasant discussion and reminiscences about past exchanges. Then Marina Rikhvanova brought the group to order. She organized the conversation around four questions: what they did in the past, how they had benefited, why the relationship ended, and what they might like to see happen in the future. For each question, she posted a sheet of flip-chart paper and stood ready with a magic marker to list the group's responses.

The members described four exchanges that took place. One was geared toward school children, one was for city administrators, and two were professional exchanges, including for local artists, two of whom were among the twelve people present.

"It was the 1990s, so people had never seen anything like it," said one of the men. "No one went abroad back then."

"I remember how shocked those Americans were when they saw Siberia for the first time," said one woman who had hosted exchange guests. "They learned three new words: *salo, vodka* and *moroz*! [lard, vodka and frost!]"

"I also remember the shock *we* had when returning to Russia after our trip to the United States," a soft-spoken man added.

"Ugh! Yes," another woman chimed in. "The airport! As soon as we arrived in the airport in Russia, there was this smell, and everyone was dressed in black, and no one smiled."

p. 102 "I remember when the school kids came back, they came to me because I worked in the city administration, and they asked me, 'Why is it not like that for us here?' " The small woman with short hair and glasses seemed overcome with emotion remembering those young people who wanted answers to questions about their country's unequal development. Marina turned to the posted paper and wrote: "Kids see the world," on it under the list of benefits resulting from sister-city exchanges.

"What were the other benefits of the exchange?" she asked the collective.

"Learning a foreign language," one participant said.

"It improves the image of the city," said another. "Baikalsk could be known internationally."

"And not just as a place with the smelly paper mill!" the black-haired woman added.

After a pause, one of the artists spoke up. “It created a new level of discussion,” he said. “It fostered a more intellectual level of discourse.”

The other artist, a thin man with a bristly brown moustache, then spoke up. “And there were even financial benefits. Several of my colleagues and I showed our work at a gallery in America and we even made some money on the event.”

Next, Marina Rikhvanova asked what happened to the sister-city partnership. “Administrations changed,” several people said at once. When asked for clarification, they said that when Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush each came to power in 2000, their governments set different priorities than those of their predecessors. Also, the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, in the United States altered funding priorities away from former Soviet countries and toward the Middle East. Visas became more difficult to procure. It was not an abrupt rupture, they explained. Rather, the infrastructure that allowed for the possibility of exchange had gradually eroded.

Then, Marina asked what they would like to see out of a renewed sister-city relationship, and people made many suggestions of various activities that they would enjoy. But when Marina asked for more concrete steps that individuals might take to bring such activities to the next level, the conversation became stilted. The hesitancy did not result from laziness, lack of faith in efficacy, or an unwillingness to take responsibility for implementing the projects. Instead, it was tied to a concern among those present that the Americans in Tahoe were actually uninterested in a long-term relationship with the people of Baikalsk.

“What I want to know is: do they, in Tahoe, really want brotherhood, or do they just want to look at each other on the computer screen?” asked the small woman who used to work for the city administration.

“Is this conversation happening over there, too?” another man wanted to know.

p. 103 The people of Baikalsk were unwilling to get their hopes up or to put effort into continuing the project if the Americans did not also take it seriously, and the Russians were skeptical that the people in Tahoe had the interest or ambition to do so.

For the residents of Tahoe, the sister-city relationship with Baikalsk in Eastern Siberia is only one of many ways that their community is linked in to the global imaginary. One group of Tahoe residents is firmly committed to Lake Baikal and to their brethren in Eastern Siberia, and that is TBI; but for others in the community, the link is barely noticed. Tahoe does not need recourse to a sister-city relationship to affirm its cosmopolitan identity. For Baikalsk, on the other hand, it *matters* that they are known abroad, and that they have a tenuous lien on South Lake Tahoe in the symbolic relationship of sister city. This connection provides hope for a wider horizon for themselves, their children, and their community. But from the late 1990s until the webinar project, this symbolic capital had not been tested to see what returns it might bring. Connecting to Tahoe via the webinars enabled the local residents to dream big, but the reality of their unequal status—given Tahoe’s routinized cosmopolitanism—threatened a rude awakening. They were loath to learn how little their sisterhood was worth.

So What Is the Point?

After the final webinar, members of Baikal Environmental Wave gathered for lunch in the cozy upstairs kitchen in the Irkutsk office. Seated behind the heavy hardwood table, the Wave members talked about a concern that was repeatedly raised by the residents of Baikalsk: Were the Americans in Tahoe really interested in collaboration? It was a question of collective self-esteem for them: people in Baikalsk did not want to put their hearts and minds into a cooperative project only to have the Americans reject or neglect them.

"They are worried that they will work toward creating a partnership, only to find that the other side doesn't want a partnership with them and isn't going to work for it," Artur explained to the group at the table.

The Wave members sat in silence, each lost in thought.

"So what *is* the point of including America?" I asked.

The members exchanged glances, waiting to see who would speak first.

"It seems to me that the most important thing is to unite Baikalsk and Goloustnoye," Artur said. "America is the catalyst to bring them into dialogue. They come because they are interested in talking to America, but they end up talking to each other."

Elena Tvorogova spoke up next.

p. 104

> **The point is to see that there are problems everywhere and to see how local people solve their problems [differently]. To paraphrase the great Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi, we think all happy families are the same, but our unhappy family is totally unique. We say, "Oh, in America everything is perfect, everything is fine, but we have all the problems." Once you interact with people in other places, no matter if those places are thousands of kilometers away, you see they have their own problems. But you also see what they are doing to fix those problems. And it gets people thinking of other ways they can be fixed. In a lot of these villages, you see people stuck in problem-thinking. They just see** : we have problems, they are awful, these people are to blame, and so forth. If you are sitting, stuck in a problem-mindset, it becomes a vicious cycle and you get nowhere. The key is to move people away from problem-thinking and toward constructive-thinking. So they say, "Ah! We could try this. Let's start a small business that fixes this problem. Or let's start a group working to defend our rights," or whatever. But the important thing is that they are thinking constructively, not just waiting for manna from heaven. When you look at other people's problems and see what they are doing [about them], it can be inspiration. You might think, "I wouldn't do it *that* way, I'd have done *this*." But you are already thinking now in a different way, that you would not have done otherwise.

In answering my question, Elena Tvorogova cogently described what might be considered the most fundamental benefit of transnational activist collaboration. While activists may indeed benefit from foreign financial resources, organizational support, or an opportunity structure that is translocal, these are all, fundamentally, strategic means to an end—geared toward achieving some predetermined collective goal. The webinars suggest, however, that there is a deeper contribution that transnational activism can make, one that is more than a means to an end, but rather is an end in itself. *Transnational connectivity can alter how we think*. It can spur creative thought, changing our approach to social problems and the means for solving them. It helps to overcome the limits to imagination and expands perceptions of the possible.

Conclusion

Baikal Environmental Wave failed to spur engagement in Bolshoye Goloustnoye when it went there on its own, but transnational webinars succeeded in drawing people out and expanding their sense of efficacy. However,
p. 105 we must ↳ be careful about how much credit is given to transnationalism itself in creating this effect, lest we fail to recognize the deeper mechanism at work.

The Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky (2009) coined the term "defamiliarization" to describe how an author can make the familiar seem strange in order to alter the reader's perception of everyday events. Transnational activist collaboration can be seen as a process of defamiliarization. Familiar social problems viewed through the eyes of a foreigner, who is facing similar problems in a different context, can alter the

apparent *permanency* of one's own environment. Defamiliarization can then spur inspiration and creative thought, in such a manner that individual efficacy becomes plausible, and eventually possible.

Defamiliarization adds a new voice and a different dimension to our understanding of the role of "the Other" in social science. Most often, a society that encounters an Other uses it a means to define and affirm themselves. "The Other" is set up as an opposing group, often embodying characteristics that the in-group views negatively, and in the process, the in-group builds its own identity (e.g., Said 1978; Bhabha 1984). Encountering the Other is a self-affirming and boundary-defining event. The experience of the webinar turns this literature on its head. Undoubtedly, all the previously discussed processes still stand, but they are incomplete, because the presence of the Other has still another implication that cannot be readily ignored. Essentially, exposure to the Other, renders Otherness in one's own circumstances plausible.

There is a spectrum of distance that appears to determine how a group experiences social difference. When activists from the Wave would reach out to villagers in their own region, the endeavor was reminiscent of the Russian Populists, or *Narodniki*, from two centuries prior. These idealistic intellectuals went out to the countryside to entice the peasantry to help overthrow the monarchy; they similarly foundered upon entrenched conservatism and a rural resistance to democratic progress. Urban elites, whether they are the Populists of yesteryear or the Wave activists today, are different in disposition from their rural counterparts, but it is not perhaps sufficient difference to inspire defamiliarization. The familiarity of common cultural norms overcomes lesser differences in habitus, and the similarity that surrounds the difference breeds skepticism and hostility rather than openness to possibility. Similarly, the webinar discussions suggest that cultural differences must not be too wide, or potential possibility again turns to hopelessness. Ion cleaners may have come from another planet, so much was their irrelevance to Bolshoye Goloustnoye. There is a "goldilocks" space of difference to spur defamiliarization; too close or too far will render the interchange inconsequential.

Cultural difference is not the only obstacle to defamiliarization. Preconceptions may forestall the imaginative
p. 106 expansion that difference can bring. ↳ In this manner, the developed world is at a decided disadvantage. Groups occupying a more privileged position in a globally stratified system may assume they have nothing to learn from exchange and thus close off the opportunity to alter their thoughts a priori. As residents of a globally dominant culture, the Americans in Tahoe find their presumptions reinforced in their daily lives precisely because the terms of global society are set by the West. They came to the webinar prepared to give but not to take. The experience of privilege props up the presumption that one's local practice is already the best practice, and difference is discounted accordingly.

However, it is possible that this predisposition to closed-mindedness in the developed world could be moderated by the duration of the defamiliarized contact. In my interviews with TBI's exchange alumni, Americans were always able to think of some contribution that Russian environmentalism could make to American environmentalism, even more so than Russians would themselves. Foreign GBT participants with whom I spoke also described positive attributes of Russian culture they would gladly adopt and ways their minds were changed by their experiences in Siberia. Extended encounters likely deepen the experience of difference beyond the surface effects that define so many aspects of "banal cosmopolitanism" (Beck 2006). When one encounters a dizzying array of disparate cultural trappings in one's mundane life, as may take place in wealthy, networked Tahoe, exposure to difference becomes so routinized that difference itself becomes normal. One would require a deeper and more subtle appreciation of another culture to actually find one's thinking transformed.

But for those occupying positions in the periphery of the globalized world, transnational activist collaboration could be one of the rare opportunities to experience that which is taken for granted in more cosmopolitan centers. For them, exposure to transnational activist networks could have a profound cognitive effect. In the case of the Wave's webinars, the effect is likely to be only a brief one—a blip on an otherwise static line of doubt. The webinar created a space apart from the local structures and conditions that fostered suspicion and

surrender. Returning to the village when the webinar series was ended would likely be sufficient to again restrict one's activist imagination. It would take prolonged involvement with the Other to truly change ingrained habits of thought and culture, to counteract the lived experience of societal limitations (Brown 2016). But the experience of the webinar shows how impressive that change could be if sustained into the future.

And we need not look only to the webinar to draw such a conclusion. The group that the Wave gathered in the Baikalsk hotel to discuss the "sister-city" exchanges fifteen years prior had all been transformed by their own
p. 107 cross-national engagement. These individuals remained some of the more active and ↳ progressive residents of Baikalsk over the years, and their participation in the sister-city exchanges likely supported this outcome. The experience of transformative events, even of relatively brief duration, may yield lifelong consequences (McAdam 1988). The webinars themselves did not achieve this, but other transnational activist collaborations might.

Finally, there is one last limitation that the experience of the webinars suggests for considering the mental effect of transnational collaboration: sincerity matters. To sustain the positive outcomes, the engagement must be respectful, open and actively sought by both parties. As the Tahoe-Baikal webinars progressed, it became increasingly evident that one of the two parties was minimally invested in the partnership. When that happened, the other side began to withdraw. Transnational collaboration comes with a risk. The burgeoning faith in oneself and willingness to become involved may result in failure—particularly in those contexts that are prone to produce fatalism and apathy. Local ridicule or state persecution will be difficult to withstand without strong moral support from one's transnational peers. If the investment in the collaboration is not pursued with sincerity, then the result may be disappointment and disillusionment, even worse than before.

But should the sweet spot in the spectrum of difference be found, and should the pitfalls and limitations of collaboration be avoided, the act of reaching across borders and working cooperatively with different cultures could have a uniquely positive effect: increased ability of individuals to imagine social change and their willingness to work toward it. This possibility has vital implications for the field of power. In an era defined by globalization, where people are becoming interconnected as never before, opportunities for defamiliarization are bountiful. In precisely this context, civil society may find its own generalizable power—voluntary action—newly expanded, even as other players in the field of power likewise leverage the global to their own advantage.

Finally, the potential of defamiliarization through transnational collaboration to spur hope and action gives a new metric for valuating local NGOs, such as GBT, TBI, and the Wave. Despite the difficulty that domestic NGOs face in trying to produce change in their home environments, the importance of their continued presence locally cannot be overstated. NGOs should not be judged solely by the success of their particular campaigns or actions, but also by the opportunity they provide to their communities to immerse themselves in transnational discourse, if only briefly. GBT offers this opportunity to its volunteers, TBI to its students, and the Wave to the villagers and town residents outside of Irkutsk through projects like the webinar. These organizations are nodes in a social network existing at the nexus of two planes—the local and the global. Their persistent
p. 108 presence in a particular locality offers that ↳ community a continuous portal to the wider world. Individuals may drift into and out of contact with this portal; people may have a life-changing, thought-altering experience as a result of that contact, and then carry the experience forward into their future lives, whether or not they continue to associate with the NGO itself. Nevertheless, the fact that this opportunity was there and available to them matters. When we evaluate civil society organizations, and the service they provide to their communities, their successes may transcend their stated goals. Their deepest contribution may be as unintentional and underappreciated as a sparsely attended webinar. Simply by opening the space for sharing, these organizations help lay the foundation for social change, even in the smallest villages of Eastern Siberia.

Notes

1. As of this writing, the Tahoe-Baikal Institute has suspended its operations, after nearly a quarter-century of coordinating its environmental education and cultural exchange schools. The invisible tie that binds Baikal and Tahoe has become more tenuous with its passing.
2. "Bolshoye" and "maloye" are adjectives that translate as "big" and "small," respectively. They designate two villages: Big Goloustnoye and Small Goloustnoye. Curiously, Maloye Goloustnoye is larger in population than Bolshoye Goloustnoye (1200 and 600 people, respectively). The name Goloustnoye roughly translates as "naked mouth." It is presumed that the name refers to the river delta on which the two villages sit. Bolshoye Goloustnoye is situated directly beside Lake Baikal where the Goloustnoye River flows into it. Maloye Goloustnoye is located about twenty minutes upriver from Bolshoye Goloustnoye in the Pribaikalskiy mountain range outlining the western edge of the lake. The river delta is wider near the lake, hence the designation "big naked mouth" for the village near the shore, and "small naked mouth" for the village further upstream where the delta narrows and becomes smaller.
3. The SEZ planned for Bolshoye Goloustnoye was relocated to Baikalsk, to ease the economic shock to the region when the paper mill was finally closed. The Bolshoye Goloustnoye villagers may yet elude their once seemingly inevitable economic development.
4. I proceeded to tell her about "company towns" in the United States, but she dismissed the possibility that America might have had anything so similar to the Soviet system.
5. Quantitative studies find scant empirical evidence for cultural difference in political systems (e.g., Booth and Seligson 1984, Tiano 1986, Seligson and Booth 1993), but it is worth remembering that the abstraction of a Likert scale opinion query may bring its own biases, divorced as it is from context and actual observed behaviors. What citizens desire may differ from what they deem possible and worth striving for.
6. Geo-tourism is defined by the National Geographic Society as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.
7. The ecosystems surrounding Lake Baikal vary substantially. Baikalsk has a great deal of snowfall. In the winter, it mounds up for several feet. Baikalsk is home to a mountain ski resort because of the quantity and quality of its snowfall. Bolshoye Goloustnoye, on the other hand, receives the greatest number of sunny days for any place in all of Russia. When snow does fall, it is often powdery and quickly blows away, off the dry steppe, on the strength of Baikal's wind. Ice skating is a common sport in Bolshoye Goloustnoye, but skiing and snow-shoeing are impossible there.
8. The webinar dates and topics were as follows: February 5—tourism, February 8—economic diversification, February 12—poverty, February 19—food, February 26—youth, March 5—the sister-city relationship.
9. I do not have exact numbers for attendance in all locations for each webinar. I was unable to attend one of them, and I only counted the number of participants in the location I was observing at each webinar. When I later asked Baikal Environmental Wave for the number of participants, they did not match the numbers that I had myself recorded (perhaps they included support staff), so rather than supply exact figures, I can only offer the range and the general sense of regular increase in involvement.
10. The word "*dacha*" comes from the Russian verb, "to give," because the state would give out these parcels in return for service rendered.
11. The climate in Baikalsk is uniquely beneficial for strawberries in that region, and locals have always sold the berries for supplemental income. Baikalsk has an established reputation for strawberries. In one of its many attempts to help Baikalsk find alternate revenue to replace the paper mill, Baikal Environmental Wave helped Baikalsk start an annual Strawberry Festival that is now a proud tradition, attracting visitors from Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude, and other neighboring towns.
12. In Russian, the term is "brother-cities," and the conversation began with the group musing on the culturally distinct gendering of inanimate objects, such as cities.