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# The Lure of Immobility. Living and Coworking in Rural France

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► **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Ortar, Aurore Flipo. The Lure of Immobility. Living and Coworking in Rural France. Phillip Vanini. Mobilities in Remote Places, Routledge, pp.189-200, 2023, 9781003321163. <10.4324/9781003321163-20>. <halshs-04171453>

**HAL Id: halshs-04171453**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04171453v1>**

Submitted on 11 Oct 2024

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*The Lure of Immobility*, in P. VANNINI (dir.), *Mobilities in Remote Places*, Londres, Routledge, 2023. DOI: 10.4324/9781003321163-20

### Abstract

Coworking spaces have blossomed in France's rural regions, where they are seen as a tool to attract or maintain a population that would otherwise live elsewhere. However, the rural French territory does not offer equal access to high-speed internet. Remoteness is thus here considered as relative as the distance can be both physical and virtual. The chapter draws the portraits of six coworkers that illustrate three ways of inhabiting the territory and living remotely, making professional choices, and experiencing mobility in everyday life and over the course of a lifetime. The proposed analysis draws on the literature on lifestyle migrants as well as on mobile lifestyles and discusses what the chosen remote immobile lifestyle tells about the evolution of those lifestyles.

The aspiration towards a different lifestyle is something that started to alter France's rural world in the 1960s, when ecological protest movements began to gather momentum and the country witnessed the last mass rural exodus. Over the years parts of the radicalization disappeared, but the desire to experience a different lifestyle in those places remained. In the last decade, digital technology has given this aspiration a new lease of life by expanding the possibilities of remote work. Originally associated with large city centers and the 2.0 economy, coworking spaces have blossomed in France's rural regions, where they are seen as a tool to attract or maintain a population that would otherwise live elsewhere (Levy Waitz, 2018). In most cases, these are funded by the community, or the space is made available by a municipality in exchange for rent. Either way, rents are low: between €100 and €150 per month. A coworking space may be only a room that can accommodate five people such as a

former school, or a wider space such as a disused factory also offering a warehouse area in which craft activities can take place.

We went to meet the people who work in such spaces<sup>i</sup> (hereafter referred to as “coworkers”) in three French departments, the Drôme, the Ardèche, and the Rhône, to gather information about their career trajectories. In order to find out about their day-to-day experiences of remote working, we asked these coworkers how they went about combining virtual and spatial mobility in rural areas out of the main transportation routes. Remoteness is here not so much defined by the kilometers but rather by the time spent to access a city or, in the context of the Rhône Valley, a high-speed rail train station. One of our hypotheses was that remoteness is deliberately chosen as it enables people to “disconnect” from railways and airports; it is a lure for individuals who, having had the opportunity to be mobile, urban, and cosmopolitan, now seek a more immobile and anchored life.

The Ardèche (327,000 inhabitants) and the Drôme (517,500 inhabitants) face each other on either side of the Rhône, 100 kilometers south of Lyon, the largest city in the region (nearly 2,000,000 inhabitants) and the Rhône Department. Ever since people began engaging in transport and trade within the area, the Rhône River—which gave the department its name—has guided and connected them: it is along this river that the cities of Lyon and Valence, the capital of the Drôme, were built. Today, the traffic of people and goods continues to be concentrated along the Rhône since the only highway connecting the three departments follows the river, as does a railroad and the TGV (high-velocity train) line. Outside the Rhône Valley, the roads immediately become narrow, winding, and relatively steep. Travelling from one point to another therefore takes time. Such journey time cannot be shortened, and this, rather than distance, is what isolates the populations of these departments since automobile transportation dominates roads and ways of thinking about travel, in spite of the ongoing search for alternatives (Flipo et al., 2021).

In this chapter, we draw up the portraits of six coworkers that illustrate three ways of inhabiting the territory and living remotely, making professional choices, and experiencing mobility in everyday life and over the course of a lifetime. “Living remotely” is defined here “as the distance from the places where the structures, populations, and activities of modern civilization are concentrated (settlements, roads, etc.)” (Boller et al., 2010, p. 320).

Remoteness is thus relative, and the distance considered can be both physical and virtual as the rural French territory does not offer equal access to high-speed internet. If “routes shape constellations of (im)mobilities” (Vannini, 2011, p. 260), access to high-speed internet does too (Pink et al., 2022). We understand mobility as “a socially negotiated process, oriented towards others and influenced by relationships, encounters, and interaction” (Scott, 2019, p. 140) in which “embodied and emplaced experiences play a crucial role” (Salazar, 2021, p. 9). The proposed analysis draws on the literature on lifestyle migrants (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009; Ortar, 2015) as well as on mobile lifestyles (Cohen et al., 2015) and discusses what the chosen remote immobile lifestyle tell us about the evolution of those lifestyles.

### **Rooted Remoteness**

Rosa is a translator. She grew up in the Ardèche, where her family lives. As the department did not have a university, she began her studies in Montpellier, 200 kilometers south of the Ardèche, then spent a year in England, followed by six months in Limoges—a medium-sized city located in the center of France, 400 kilometers from the Ardèche—after which she went to Brussels to carry out a six-month internship. Since she did not find a salaried job in the Ardèche, Rosa decided to start her own business, after having completed a year of additional training in Mulhouse in Alsace. Due to the nature of her work (translating from English to French), she has no economic link with her place of residence: “Everything is done remotely, by email.”<sup>ii</sup> Her competence in virtual mobility saves her from the need to physically move around on a daily basis: She never meets her clients, and all her prospecting work is done via

the internet.

In Rosa's case, living in the countryside is not a choice that sprang from an urge for remoteness. She has her roots there, made up of a strong network of family and friends. When she became a translator and then a freelancer, Rosa knew that she would be isolated professionally and therefore also in everyday life. And yet—although she does move around to take her children to school—this isolation has ended up weighing on her, as does the difficulty of separating her professional activity from her personal life. The need to meet other people and to leave the house prompted her to look for a private office, but this option turned out to be too expensive for her budget. After hearing about coworking through conversations with acquaintances, Rosa got involved in creating a coworking space in a former school located in a neighboring village. “What attracted me to a coworking space was really the prospect of socialization. [...] Coworking allows me to have an office outside my home, without breaking the budget.” Another attraction was to draw a boundary between work and personal life: “I no longer have to struggle with the feeling of never quite being at work or at home; being a little bit of both all the time.”

Our research has shown elsewhere (Flipo & Ortar, 2020) that the search for a coworking space is closely associated with the desire to separate professional and personal time; this is a common factor in all the portraits presented here. In Rosa's case, the coworking pursuit is also linked to the desire to take part in the community of a populated area. This first venue and the one she joins later, after moving, are more than just workspaces; they are also places to meet and interact with other people, something that leads Rosa to associate herself with her coworkers' projects. As mentioned in the literature (Lejoux et al., 2019), this is less about being part of a professional support network and more about being involved in the local community, by offering services or artistic and cultural contributions while benefiting from a space in which to interact on a daily basis.

Like Rosa, Elodie lives in the place she originally came from. Her family and that of her husband live in nearby villages. For her, staying was a choice, and she built her professional life around her place of residence. The vocational training offered in France is linked to each region's economic activities, and this tends to dictate what sectors young people train in (Coquard, 2019) even when these sectors are in decline. The Roanne region is still known for the textile activity that lies scattered throughout the region. Elodie started her studies in the textile industry at the age of 14, following a career trajectory offered locally at first and then in Lyon, 45 kilometers from where she lives. During that time, she witnessed the de-industrialization of the region:

The BTS (Higher technician diploma, obtained two years after high school) is in decline: An employment office counselor once even told me, “you’re heading down a dead-end street.” But by then, it didn’t seem possible to do anything else. After a year, I came back to work as a cutter for a textile company that was making air-conditioning ducts. Then I got into the lingerie sector, at first just as a quality controller and then little by little I established myself [advancing in the profession].

Although Elodie managed to work locally, she was bothered by her company’s policy of not giving work to local businesses. Since this approach made no sense to her, she created her own enterprise in the textile industry, commissioning the manufacture of her collections to her local contacts. At the same time, she built up her skill set, taking courses to learn to become a self-employed entrepreneur, create a website, and solicit customers online. This was particularly valuable at a time when the French government had gradually enabled all administrative procedures to be carried out remotely.

However, working from home soon became a struggle for her: “What I missed was the social bond, I felt like I was losing motivation and cutting myself off. I was lonely.” It was during her trips to Lyon to attend training courses that she discovered coworking spaces.

However, Lyon was too far away, and the coworking spaces were too expensive, so she had to abandon that path. Instead, she found a small venue near home and then another in a coworking space created at the town hall's initiative in the village square: "There's the social factor, and the fact you can leave your things and come back the next day, so you don't waste time putting everything away and taking it out again." Coworking also offered a proper workplace with a public entranceway, allowing Elodie to make her business visible and to offer sewing lessons to all ages. This makes her feel like she is involved in village life. Working with and for her region gives meaning to her work; Elodie participates in local life, enlivening it by contributing what she has to offer.

In Rosa and Elodie's case as well as for all the people met who grew up in rural areas, the professional trajectory has been altered by the anchor of the family and the desire to live and work there, despite professional orientations not particularly suited to building a career locally. The area they live in is then a social resource, a space in which they are keen to participate but that they find difficult to sustain. Most importantly, it is a place they could not possibly live in without becoming experts in what can be likened to virtual mobility. Indeed, it would be impossible for them to live in the countryside were it not for the professional opportunities offered by the virtual world, since their commercial outlets are located elsewhere. For them, the search for meaningful work is manifested by a return home—that is, to a place capable of producing the interconnection that gives meaning to their chosen life. Their identity is thus rooted but sustained by virtual mobilities which help them follow their chosen lifestyles. Coworking helps them get out of the perceived isolation, sustain their local identities through their participation in the local life and thus participate in a more vibrant remote local life.

## **Mobile Remoteness: Looking for Moorings**

Maëlle is a professional photographer. For several years, she led a nomadic existence moving around different countries. She did not have a permanent home; instead, she worked and stayed “at other people’s homes; at Airbnbs, hotels, or campsites; at my parents’ or my grandmother’s; or, if I was staying put for a while, in a rental apartment.” A year before the interview, she decided to settle down, though she didn’t yet know where she would live. While she was in the process of figuring this out, a friend lent her his office in a coworking space. “I thought, ‘Okay! This is where I’m going to start.’ [...] I liked the idea of being able to keep my equipment somewhere and having a defined workplace.” Magda researched coworking spaces while WWOOFing (taking part in the volunteer program World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) during her holidays: “When I went to visit this place, I felt it suited me perfectly in terms of outlook, values, and so on.” On that occasion, she also visited the town, and that sealed her decision.

While other regions of France could have met her expectations in terms of landscape appeal and low population density, her choice was determined by her desire not to stray too far “from the Paris-Marseille axis because I grew up in Paris and I lived in Marseille and many of my professional ties are in Marseille, as are my friends.” Maëlle is looking for an accessible remoteness in terms of transportation and access to high-speed internet, which might sound like an oxymoron. She chose this region for the scenery and her intuition: “that there was a social fabric that corresponded to me, people who were like me.” Since the 1960s, both the Drôme and the Ardèche departments have been popular with people in search of alternative lifestyles linked to environmental movements; this is what Maëlle means by “like me.” The environment is

one of the reasons I wanted to settle down. [...] My international nomadic lifestyle, citizen of the world and all that stuff, being on a plane every month, it didn't suit me at all. It didn't fit in with my political and ecological values.

Maëlle chose her place of residence based on the distance she would need to cover by bike to get to the coworking space. She aspires to do away with the need for a car even for her business trips: to travel from home “to the station on my bike with my photo equipment, that's my dream,” but very few of her clients are based in the Drôme department, and depending on the commissions she receives, this means she has to travel by train or car. Apart from taking pictures, “most of what I do is remote work since when I make a montage for someone, I send it by We Transfer or by Vimeo. Sending invoices, arranging work by making phone calls, selling stories to magazines.” Her professional practice is therefore independent of her place of residence, and its only connection with the region—the one she would like to develop—occurs while she is taking pictures. Another reason Maëlle seeks out this connection to the region is in order to give meaning to her decision to settle. She makes a bitter observation about nomadism: “When you're a nomad, things slip away from you. You're not building anything. You're just passing by all the time.” Now, she needs to “recharge her batteries and create beautiful things.” Ever since her arrival in Drôme, the scale of the experiences she seeks has changed, and she now enjoys: “small adventures on an almost microscopic scale.” This gives meaning to her chosen mooring.

Maëlle's expertise in physical and virtual mobility allows her to live wherever she wants. She is a good example of a “lifestyle migrant” (Benson & O'Reilly, 2016) for whom the various mobilities are seized as opportunities to build a desired kind of life, which nevertheless comes at a price—not just economically but even more importantly, socially—that is often underestimated (Kaufmann & Montulet, 2009). But she also illustrates the difficulty already present to some extent in the previous vignettes but is also here a common

feature of lifestyle migrants: the need for reconciliation between their professional life and their search for human values (Hoey, 2016). The immobility chosen, in a village at the foot of a mountain range, is largely motivated by an urge for social reconnection. As Maëlle mentions, she has found people in this region who resemble her politically and who share her values. Although she is happy with her decision to settle here, she does express mixed feelings about her sedentary lifestyle:

I became very sedentary last year, which did me a lot of good but I realized that it also felt good to go and see other things in other places, because you soon feel like you are in a bubble here. I also need to see other things.

Remoteness and immobility are thus perceived with ambivalence: While idealized, they are also viewed as a withdrawal into oneself that limits one's ability to regenerate, and at the same time, as a means of finding balance and recovering strength which might express confusion between mooring and remoteness. Remoteness is also not isolation, and the connection to the local is sought through the coworking space envisioned as a social hub and a place to share ideas as well as a separation from home.

Alice is also a professional photographer. Originally from the Angers region, she has also lived in Marseille, and nine years ago, she settled down in the Ardèche to live with her partner. A farmer by trade, he had come by the opportunity to exploit chestnut groves in the rolling hills of the Ardèche. For them, living in a rural area was a choice motivated by the urge to reconnect: "I think when you choose to live in the countryside, it's because the countryside is calling out to you. It's like you want to find a connection with nature, you want to get out of your house and walk."

Her photography work ranges from personal projects, "sharing my personal work through books, exhibitions, invitations, conferences," to commissions. The nature of Alice's work has changed since she moved to the countryside, and like Maëlle, she has sought to

increase commissions from departmental and regional institutions. Such commissions, however, lead her to frequently travel by car, despite the relative proximity:

A photo is a day's work. I drive at least two hours to get to places. Just now, I was in Lozère. [...] The scenery's nice but it's two and a half hours' drive to get there, take a photo, and then two and a half hours back. Everything's far away because the roads are not very good.

A driving that she also finds stressful.

Two-thirds of her time was then spent doing administrative work from home. After a while, however, Alice found that this style of working was a strain. In Marseille, she had already discovered coworking and rented a space. She now looked for the same thing locally and found a space that had opened just one kilometer from her home. Though it is a small space that struggles to fill with coworkers, it is connected with other spaces and therefore fuels professional projects, feeding the exchanges of services that Alice needs in order to grow professionally:

When you're alone at home, especially in the countryside, you soon find yourself isolated from your professional network. [...] Sometimes I feel a bit disconnected. Having other, similar practices by my side does me good as well, it fuels my work.

This loneliness, so deeply felt in everyday life, is of the kind created by professional isolation as well as by remoteness. However, despite the friendships and professional relations made through the coworking space, the remoteness is deeply felt. Access to a local network and virtual spaces does not erase the need to travel to get out of her remoteness to sustain and inspire her work. In addition to her usual work, Alice also takes trips outside the region by train, plane, or car, depending on the destination, to hold workshops, exhibitions, or longer photo shoots as part of commissions or for canvassing purposes. We go back here to the contradiction pointed out by Maëlle as Alice also finds that travelling abroad or in French

cities boosts her energy: “I’m a globetrotter. I can’t keep still. I need to refresh my ideas.” As with any kind of travelling, the quality of otherness is something she seeks: otherness perceived as an opening that grows all the more important when the everyday circle of relations is limited, illustrating here the complexities of belonging and identity pointed out by Cohen et al. (2015).

Like in Maëlle’s case, the immobility and remoteness so highly priced also engender cultural and professional isolation, and at the time of our meeting, she had undertaken professional retraining as the network of relations sustained through the coworking spaces does not fully compensate for the relational isolation. Indeed, despite these individuals’ desire for immobility and the local resources found through the coworking spaces and the professional network they sustain, mobility is a resource that allows them to continue in their chosen career trajectories, to keep questioning the world and experiencing otherness. In Alice’s case it comes at a price: that of the use of the car. On the one hand, the car represents a link that allows her to break her geographical and professional isolation; and on the other, driving is an ongoing stress that no longer compensates for the pleasure of travelling through beautiful landscapes or getting to meet her urban network. Both Maëlle and Alice illustrate the complexity of belonging and identity associated with a need for sustained mobility difficult to sustain while living out of the main routes.

### **Immobile Remoteness: Finding Anchors**

Yannick is an engineer and a man highly committed to his principles. He has lived in the Drôme since 2014, when he came to join his wife, whom he had met two years earlier while working in Burgundy. Wanting to make a change, Yannick has adapted his everyday life and his work life and adopted different ways of consuming, in a setting that he has not chosen but whose aesthetic qualities he appreciates. Through his choice of residence, transport, and professional trajectory, Yannick makes daily efforts to limit his contribution to climate

change. Determined to carry out work that is meaningful for the local area, he turned to the confectionery.

The need to meet other people, together with the urge to work locally, drove Yannick to opt for a coworking space:

It's absolutely worth my while to have a small [accounting] business called Hublot that deals with the accounts of Saint-Nazaire's city council; that way, I can show that together, we can create new systems and find common ground for essential matters. What's more, at the territorial level, I think it's great that we have a place to host project owners as well as people who pass through our area. It's an entry point, an open door.

Yannick continues:

Here, we have a place where people can physically come together. We have a capacity for action. We can share a printer, an internet connection, exchange slogans, ideas, we can do things. [...] It becomes a think tank [because] we're all different. Some have very mainstream outlooks, and others have different ways of thinking that may be exotic, or alternative, or ubiquitous. It's clear that the place is also a kind of social melting pot. [...] People who have completely different backgrounds, origins, desires, needs.

In the coworking space he uses, Yannick found the otherness that Magda and Alexa also sought in their respective coworking spaces and that yet remained insufficient to fully satisfy the needs of the latter two. This lends meaning to Yannick's work; a meaningfulness that is also rooted in the desire to travel less and, if possible, use his physical strength. In his everyday life, he travels by bike or car, depending on the nature of the trips.

Yannick applies this logic even to trips taken during the holidays, by train or by car, restricting them to a radius of two hours' travelling time around the family home: "The rule

says: No more than two hours of travel. [...] So, we take a compass, and we draw a two-hour drive radius around our home.”

Here again coworking sustains the need for otherness. Coworking is not just a way of creating a bond: It is also a way to show one’s attachment to the host territory, interact with one another, exchange ideas, and make a change. Yannick’s reorientation of his professional activity and his willingness, unlike Elodie, to work with local companies sustain his need for reconciliation between his professional life and his values, and the coworking space acts as a hub to share and test his ideas.

Romain is a thermal engineer who started out his career working in a village of 73 inhabitants. He then left for two years to travel by bike. On his return, he began by working in Morvan, another French sparsely populated rural area, then moved to the Drôme, where “for a long time, I worked from home. It was too cramped, and it was uncomfortable. So, I went to a coworking space where I worked on my own account, independently, but alongside the others.” As to the matter of rental costs, Romain answers:

Before going there, I thought it was an unreasonable expense because I am a self-employed entrepreneur so, €100 per month, that’s €1,200 per year that I spend on rent, €1,200 per year less remuneration, which is basically the equivalent of a month’s salary. So, it seemed like a lot to me. But coworking turned out to be a real solace and so I’ve never regretted it.

This satisfaction springs both from the opportunity to interact and the comfort of having a workspace outside home. During his stay at the coworking space, Romain began to collaborate with two architects “who worked here in Vernoux.” This collaboration encouraged him to move closer to his new workplace, thus avoiding the need for travel. He therefore moved to Ardèche: “to be able to work here four times a week without having to make a long trip.” The accommodation he chose is close enough for him to get by bike, since

the goal is to have only one car for the household; a car that he ended up acquiring even though “for a long time I didn’t want to buy one, so I chose my living and working places accordingly.” Romain’s professional activity is linked to the place he lives and takes place “within a radius of fifty kilometers around here.” It is a pragmatic choice:

In the Ardèche, 50 kilometers means an hour’s drive or more. In half a day, if I travel an hour and a half, spend one to two hours in meetings and then an hour and a half to get back, that’s already a fully loaded morning. So, taking on projects further away is not profitable and it’s also super tiring.

The indispensable car also has a limited scope in terms of usefulness for work.

Romain optimizes his travels both for environmental reasons and to avoid overexerting himself. Unlike Yannick, however, Romain allows himself longer trips during the holidays. But both pay strict attention to their means of transport: It is a factor that conditions their work–life choices, their experience of the local and thus their lifestyle. Living in rural areas is a conscious decision, a choice that they enact and through which they earn a living as they engage with their local areas and carry out their professional activities while making as little compromise as possible to their environmental commitments. The resulting immobility is nourished by the encounters that Romain and Yannick make at coworking spaces. Although both of them are seeking to have an impact on the local life, they are not rooted nor looking for moorings. Remoteness is a conscious choice, and coworking a convenience that helps avoid the drawbacks of the everyday isolation resulting from remote working.

## **Conclusion**

May the coworkers be rooted, mobile or immobile, remoteness is here part of being out of the way, and this perception is relative not to the distance but to the time spent travelling through space and to population density. Remoteness is thus a question of temporality as well as

tiredness due to the vigilance required to drive on winding roads. Remoteness redefines the ability to network and get access to work.

Indeed, like the lifestyle migrants observed by Hoey (2005, 2014) or Benson and O'Reilly (2016), the coworkers are looking for a reconciliation between their residential choice, their job, their attachment to a territory, and their values. Coworking appears here as a way to reconcile those different aspects of their life. For those who can't, remoteness is also defined by what cannot be carried on: a career according to urban standards. Remoteness relates thus to slowing down sometimes more than was expected when settling in a rural area for all of those whose work implies networking activities that cannot be replaced by internet meetings.

Remoteness can engender isolation. People who have always lived in these areas take remoteness into account in their career plans, and they prioritize a non-professional social circle (family and friends). In the same way, people who have changed or adapted their work to cope with the constraints posed by the area—namely the extended travel times—also manage to take this dimension into account. For those whose career has been dependent on mobility, however, and despite their choice to adopt a new lifestyle, remoteness becomes a constraint to be grappled with. It is a kind of battle that manifests itself in ambivalent feelings towards the effects of immobility in an isolated area—above all, the reduced diversity in their relational space.

Those who choose immobility make “remoteness” a lifestyle based on strong convictions that arise from a belief in the fundamental need for socialization and to avoid travel. These are the people who value proximity as much as remoteness. It is they who, like local artisans, seek to align their professional activity with a service rendered to the area while at the same time mastering the virtual spheres encompassed by their professions.

The life and work expectations, the willingness to build one's life according to expectations that might be contradictory, the mobility patterns before and after settling in a rural space, and the ambivalence regarding mobility indicate a proximity between lifestyle migrants and coworkers. However, unlike the mobile lifestyles observed by Cohen et al. (2015), place matters, and the choice of becoming a coworker is part of a willingness to act and sustain a local life. Coworking is in those cases a way to fulfill a need for both informality and the exchange of ideas. Coworking is here about place making out of the main routes and relationality (Vannini, 2011) for the lifestyle migrants as well as the local, blurring thus the boundary between them. Coworking spaces are here adding symbolic and political significance to the chosen relative physical immobility. The modalities of this territorial investment are manifested in ethical choices—to enliven the area in which one has chosen to live through daily action even if that means refusing certain offers—and in the capacity to act that is gained through immobility; in other words, in the ability to reformulate or even change one's professional activity so that it takes on local meaning. In such arrangements, having greater involvement with the local community acts as a kind of compensation for individuals who do not redefine their career paths. Here, despite those commitments and unlike the people observed by Cohen et al. (2015), coworking is also a way to reestablish boundaries between work, leisure, and family life. More diverse than the lifestyle migrants, more settled and anchored than the mobile lifestyles, the coworkers are also seeking alternatives to homeworking to sustain their choices of lifestyle in their chosen remoteness and give meaning to embodied and emplaced experiences.

### **Acknowledgment**

This research was funded by The French National Research Agency (ANR), grant number ANR-17-CE22-0004.

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<sup>i</sup> For a more detailed description of the study, see P. Lejoux et al. (2019).

<sup>ii</sup> Translator’s note: This quotation is our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of foreign language material cited in this chapter are our own.