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Water, Oil and Spirits: Liquid Maps of the Taiga in Eremei Aipin's novel *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn*

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Abstract:

In this chapter, I present a reading of Khanty author Eremei Aipin's novel *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn* through its main liquid elements: water, oil and spirits. I approach the novel through the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism. I argue that all these three fluids participate in the imagining of the literary space of the novel by creating their own liquid maps that reflect rather different ways of relating to the surrounding environment. The cold, northern river is depicted as a watery map that connects the Indigenous Khanty people on a geographical and temporal level as well as transmits the Indigenous epistemology, underlining the inseparability of people and non-human nature. This map of the river is juxtaposed with maps of oil and spirits that represent the colonial mapping of the settler state and demonstrate an instrumentalised view of non-human nature. Re-mapping the area through oil and spirits leads to devastating consequences for the taiga environment and the Indigenous people whose epistemology and cultural memory are entangled in it.

From the 1930s onwards, the need for electricity for building the communist society and its industries led to massive hydroelectric projects, such as the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station, that were meant to harness Russia's largest rivers for electricity production (Josephson et al., 2013, pp. 76, 81–82). After World War II, the oil production of the country shifted from faraway Caucasus to the Volga-Ural region and, later in the 1960s, to West Siberia (Moser, 2018, pp. 55, 59–60). River-based electricity was needed in order to secure the extractive industries (Josephson et al., 2013, pp. 128–130), which in return polluted the local river basins with oil and petroleum runoffs (Weiner, 1999, pp. 382–383). Moving the emphasis of the resource extraction to West Siberia also had a massive impact on the Indigenous peoples of the area, whose livelihoods depended on the reindeer pastures, rivers and lakes that were turned into extraction sites or contaminated as an effect of the mining and extraction industries.

The focus of this article is on the interconnectedness of water and oil. I discuss how Khanty author Eremei[1] Aipin's novel *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn* depicts the northern taiga as intersected by three different flowing substances: water, oil and spirits. I ask what meanings these liquids are given in the novel, from what kinds of epistemologies these meanings emerge and how they

[1]Depending on transliteration system, the author's name is sometimes transliterated as Yeremei Aipin.

participate in drawing a fluid map – or maps – of Aipin's home region. I argue that comparing these different maps brings out the conflict between Khanty people's relationship with the non-human environment of the region and the Soviet Union's settler-colonial claim on the natural resources in the area. For the Khanty, the river appears as an organic watery map that connects Khanty people on a geographical level, as well as a temporal level, whereas oil and alcohol are defined by the settler-colonial logic of conquering the region through its natural resources. If the map of the river emerges in the entanglement of the river and the Khanty people, the oil stream and alcohol are related to the state's understanding of the non-human environment and people as hierarchically separated from one another. Even if Aipin's novel was published in 1990, the juxtaposition of these flowing substances continues to demonstrate the tension between Indigenous people and the nation state today as oil companies aim at expanding their extraction sites near Lake Numto, a sacred place for many West-Siberian Indigenous peoples (Golovnev & Golovneva, 2021).

I approach these questions through the theoretical perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism. As I read the different liquids of the novel through the notion of mapping, I pay special attention to the intersections of maps and cartographic theory, ecocriticism and postcolonial theories. Because the liquids not only flow through space but also through time and because they interconnect with questions of remembering and forgetting, my analysis also draws from memory studies. I start this article with short introductions of Khanty people in general, Eremei Aipin in particular and his novel, as well as the above-mentioned theoretical frames. Then I move onto analysing the river in Aipin's novel as a spatial actor that reflects Khanty people's relationship with their home region and maps the geography and different temporalities of the area. After that, I look at oil and its related mapping practices as antithetic to the flowing river. Finally, I discuss how the settler-colonial oil extraction, which destroys the northern environment, becomes transcribed in Khanty people's bodies through alcohol and hence underlines the embodied entanglement of the Khanty people and the environment they inhabit and upon which they depend.

Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn as a Native historiography

Eremei Aipin belongs to the Khanty people, an Ugrian Indigenous people living in western Siberia. Khanty's traditional livelihoods include fishing, hunting and reindeer herding. They live a semi-nomadic life as they change their habitation according to the season: they change from permanent winter huts to temporary summer shelters in their fishing and hunting grounds. The Khanty were subdued under the reign of the Muscovite empire in the late sixteenth century, and like other Native peoples in Siberia, the Khanty had a *yasak* (a fur tribute) imposed on them (Forsyth, 1992, pp. 36–37; Gurvich, 1982, p. 11). The Bolshevik revolution and the change in policies concerning

Indigenous peoples affected the Khanty people as well. At first, the communist rule aimed at ameliorating Indigenous peoples' lives and elevating them from what were perceived to be backward conditions to the same level as the rest of the country, yet the philanthropic spirit disappeared with Stalin's seizure of power. The urge to 'civilize' the Natives grew more pressing in the rush to realise similar collectivisation in Siberia that was seen in other parts of the country (Forsyth, 1992; Slezkine, 1994). Soviet policies were not met without resistance. Among the Khanty, they led to the Kazym rebellion that started in 1931 with an uprising which grew into a series of short violent conflicts in 1933 and the demand for Russians to, for example, close the cultural bases, stop fishing in the sacred Lake Numto and leave the area. The revolt was supressed by Soviet forces in a short confrontation (Golovnëv, 1995, 165–178).

One of the Bolsheviks' main tasks among the Indigenous peoples was promoting literacy, which necessitated developing written forms for Indigenous languages. The uniform language policy in the Soviet Union led to a similar development of written languages and literary tradition among all the Indigenous peoples of the North. Along with literacy and education, a group of northern national intellectuals emerged, Native people who were educated at the Institute of the Peoples of the North in Leningrad State University. This group was needed by the Soviet authorities in order for them to serve as mediators between the new power and the local Indigenous communities (Toulouze, 2005, p. 141). Nevertheless, the first Khanty authors and translators emerged from a literary circle at the Ostiako-Vogul'sk pedagogical institute (Ogryzko, 2002, pp. 11–14). Regardless of the early names in Khanty literature, Viacheslav Ogryzko (2002) primarily connects the rise of the prose tradition in Khanty culture with Eremei Aipin, whose first book came out in 1979 (p. 23). The main conflict in Aipin's works is the threat of oil extraction to the Khanty culture, which is dependent on the surrounding natural environment. Ogryzko (2002) compares Aipin to Russian village prosaists, especially Valentin Rasputin, whose *Farewell to Matyora* (*Proshchanie s Matëroi*, 1976) presents a similar tragedy of a traditional culture being swept away by modernity to that which Aipin presents in his works on Khanty people and oil extraction (pp., 23–24). As the most prominent author in Khanty literature and with a political career at the state level, it is no wonder that Aipin's works have provoked scholarly interest (Ogryzko, 2006; Lagunova, 2007; Miliakhova, 2009). The critical tone of his works has also enabled a discussion of his literature from a postcolonial point of view, even though the postcolonial paradigm remains generally underdiscussed in the Soviet context (Smola, 2017; Boliachevets & Sablin, 2016).

Critique towards Soviet power is present in Aipin's *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn*, which deals with the dreadful consequences of oil drilling in the home area of the Khanty people. The first

version of the novel was published as a short story in 1980, in the journal *Ural*, but the much more critical and pessimistic novel came out only at the dawn of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the publication of *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn*, Aipin has published short stories and a novel, as well as worked in state politics, but nevertheless, the tragic novel about a Khanty hunter, Dem'ian, and his three-day journey to a local village and back remains his most notable work. The temporally leaping narration and multiple focalisers[2] from different decades turn Dem'ian's journey in the novel into a historical journey whose timespan stretches from the purges of the 1930s to the late 1980s. In addition to the main character's life story and journey, the novel entails stories of his relatives, other kinsmen and that of his son in the future. These embedded narratives take the reader on a journey through the Khanty people's history at the same time as Dem'ian travels across the taiga. Besides historical events, the novel is rich in allusions to Khanty myths and other folklore, which are transmitted to the reader in the narration as part of the Khanty people's thoughts or communication (Miliakhova, 2009, pp. 15–16). Even if previous studies on Aipin and his novel acknowledge the criticism of Soviet practices and the importance of the non-human environment in his works, a more elaborate analysis of the interconnectedness of these themes is still to be made. The present study strives to fill this void.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, mapping and memory

As stated, the main conflict in *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn* is caused by state-controlled natural resource extraction that harms both the non-human environment and Indigenous people of the area. The interrelatedness of environmental damage and settler-colonialist practices makes postcolonial ecocriticism a suitable and natural theoretical framework for approaching the novel. Postcolonial ecocriticism is a field that discusses the intersections of postcolonial and ecocritical theories, a field that emerged in the second half of the 2000s, predominantly in the writings of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2007, 2010). Bringing together postcolonialism and ecocriticism is not unproblematic as these two frameworks have mutual tensions: first world nations' environmentalism may risk stepping over marginalised people's and cultures' interests and adapt a universalist white gaze on the (formerly) colonised countries, which consequently reinforces imperial and colonial hierarchies (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007, pp. 72–73; Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, pp. 2–5).

However, in Aipin's novel, questions of environmentalism and Native people's rights to their land are not conflicted, they are closely interlinked as both non-human nature and Indigenous people

[2] The concepts of an 'anachronism' as a temporal discrepancy between the story and the narrative and 'focalization' as the point of view through which the story is narrated are both developed by Gérard Genette in his book *Narrative Discourse* (Genette, 1983).

appear in a marginalised and oppressed position in relation to the settler-colonial Soviet power. The consequences of this uneven power hierarchy lead to environmental damage and the degradation of the Khanty people. As they mostly occur gradually, in the long term, I approach them through Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. According to Nixon (2011) *slow violence* is 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (p. 2). Even though Nixon's focus lies on environmental humanities, the concept has been adapted in order to describe the consequences of settler colonialism (Wakeham, 2021). It also fits a reading of Aipin's novel in which environmental and settler-colonial slow violence cannot be separated from one another. As Aipin's novel underlines the embodied character of Khanty people's interrelatedness with the non-human environment, another relevant concept in my analysis is Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality. With *trans-corporeality* Alaimo (2008, 2018) refers to the enmeshment of the (human) body in the environment, which not only surrounds the body but also permeates the body and diffuses the boundary between the physical self and the material world. Understanding the Khanty people as trans-corporeally entangled in the surrounding nature makes it possible to see how the consequences of slow violence in the non-human environment are reflected in Khanty people's bodies.

In this article, postcolonial and ecocritical theories also intersect in the concept of mapping that is central in my reading of Aipin's novel. In postcolonial theory in particular, the role of maps and mapping practices has been vastly discussed as maps have been seen both as tools for legitimising colonial conquest and as demonstrations of colonialist discourses. As John Harley (1988) pointed out, maps have formed nation states' and empires' main tool for executing territorial power by demarcating territorial claims on spaces that have been detached from their social dimension through the cartographic representation. The imperialist function of maps is emphasised by the fact that the map is far from a neutral and objective geographical image, it is laden with power structures and projective distortions that easily remain unrecognised (Harley, 1988, pp. 287–294; Huggan, 2008, pp. 23–26). As a means of knowledge production with a certain epistemological basis, maps not only reflect the relationship with human 'others', they also reflect the relationship with non-human ones as well. For example, according to Leila Harris and Helen Hazen (2009), maps not only 'privilege certain social groups over others', 'similar hierarchies of values operate to privilege some species or non-living natures over others' and they 'naturalize contingent links between spaces and territories, and constellations of human–environment relations' (pp. 55, 57). Both postcolonial and non-human perspectives on cartographies are visible in Aipin's novel where the map used by oil-

seeking geologists both disregards the Indigenous presence and habitats in the area by labelling their habitat as drilling fields and naturalises environmental damage through regarding non-human nature as a natural resource.

The last important conceptual tool for my analysis is memory. Even if such an abstract concept might seem unrelated to a postcolonial and ecocritical reading that emphasises materiality and embodiment, in line with the suggestion of Hartmut Böhme (1988, pp. 24–25), I understand the liquid elements, especially the river, to simultaneously be both material and symbolic. Therefore, discussing water from the perspective of cultural studies necessitates considering the multiple discursive, cultural and symbolic meanings embedded in this material entity. In *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn*, the flow of the river is elementarily linked with flows of time and life that are manifested through memory. My discussion on memory relies on the notion of cultural memory elaborated by Jan Assmann (1992) and Aleida Assmann (1999, 2011). With *cultural memory* they refer to memory that is stored outside of the human mind in rituals, myths and cultural artefacts. As it passes from one generation to another, it transfers cultural and social knowledge and creates cohesion between the members of a community. If cultural memory creates a sense of togetherness and social belonging through a set of cultural formations, it is communicative memory that passes on social memory between the individual members of a community (Welzer, 2005, pp. 13–14). Whereas cultural memory maintains the grand narrative of a social group, Welzer (2005, p. 15) points out that communicative memory defines one's personal belonging to that group by determining one's individual history in relation to the collective past.

Mapping with the river

Even though Dem'ian's journey in Aipin's *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn* takes place on a road, it is not the terrestrial road but the river alongside which he travels that constitutes as the central element in the literary space of the novel. In fact, the terrestrial road has formed in order to travel alongside the river as both 'the winter road and the summertime "road", the water'[3], serve as the route between villages and smaller settlements around the taiga (Aipin, 2014, p. 55). Therefore, it is specifically the river that defines Dem'ian's movement 'up the river. Moreover, rivers and river systems designate the larger geographical context of Dem'ian's home region near the Arctic as up in the North 'begins the Nenets tundra, near the river basin' and the rivers 'flow into the Arctic Ocean whose breath he sometimes feels in autumn and spring' (Aipin, 2014, pp. 42–43). The river also appears as the defining feature when describing the Khanty people's settlements around the

[3] Translations from the Russian sources are my own.

northern taiga as different Khanty families are not only defined through their clan's names but also through their clan's residence in relation to the river, whether they are upstream or downstream and along which tributaries the families have spread. The significance of the river for the local Khanty families also becomes evident in the way the narrator only rarely refers to the Khanty people as 'the Khanty people' and rather identifies them through the river as the 'river people' (Aipin, 2014, p. 127).

The river's importance in depicting Dem'ian's home region turns the waterscape into a watery map through which the reader perceives the northern taiga and its inhabitants. Even though the spatial description of the novel is not a map in a traditional sense, it enables the reader to form a map-like image of the literary space in which the work takes place, and hence, it may be understood 'as a form of mapping or a cartographic activity' (Tally, 2013, p. 45). Whereas in 2013 Robert Tally (pp. 49–50, 54) saw the writer or the narrator as the active mapmaker who chooses what to include in the *literary cartography* of the work, in Aipin's novel, the description of the Khanty's home region is given in terms of the river. The narrator may travel with the characters up and down the river, but it is the flow of the water, the riverscape and the appearance of tributaries, lakes or swamps that lead the narration of the space. In this sense, the narrator does not merely map the river but rather maps *with* the river, which makes the river an active participant in the production of the literary cartography of the area. This idea of mapping with a river resonates with Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis' (2013) idea of thinking with water rather than '*of* or *about*' it (p. 3) in order to dismantle the idea of water as a resource and to emphasise our own material, embodied and discursive entanglement with it. Similarly, the way in which Aipin's narrator engages in the creation of the literary cartography *with* the river questions the distinction between the observing subject and the passive observed object typical for cartographic activity (cf. Kitchin et al., 2009, pp. 2–3).

The entangled nature of the Khanty people and the river is visible in the way the river is used in the novel as a metonym for the whole Khanty community that lives along it. It is the river (instead of people) that turns into a subject who 'remembers' (Aipin, 2014, p. 271) or 'loses its last soldier and last singer' (p. 334). The narrator's way of dissolving individual human subjects with the use of the river metonym questions divisions between human and non-human, as well as a milieu and the persons or beings dwelling in it. Instead of underlining the Khanty people as individual subjects living along the river, the novel depicts both the rivery space and its inhabitants as an entity with agentic capacities. In this way, the description of the river concretises Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis's (2013, p. 76) idea of how watery milieus challenge the common way of understanding a

milieu as ‘a passive backdrop’ by simultaneously being an inextricable part of people’s material being and providing the conditions for existing and operating. Acknowledging the watery nature of the milieu necessitates the ‘dissolution of oneself as a sovereign subject’ that, at the same time, dissolves the dichotomy between human and non-human by underlining the interconnectedness between human individuals and different non-human entities around us (Chandler & Neimanis, 2013, p. 75).

This dissolution of human subjects and the human/non-human dichotomy by means of the watery milieu becomes specifically apparent when the narrator tells how the information of a death of a Khanty person travels among Khanty families on the riverside: ‘The piece of news spread slowly, stayed overnight at smoky campfires, travelled along over grassed crossing places, leaning on a flint oar in a furious flow, stayed few days in fishermen’s and hunters’ huts, climbed up the riverside. Finally, it reached those to whom it was primarily meant.’ (Aipin, 2014, pp. 76–77). The agentic subject of the passage is not limited to the people carrying the message, it is the message itself, as well as the whole riverscape that consists of people, water, and other non-human entities. Such a mode of narration takes a step away from human-centeredness towards more all-encompassing modes of imagination that recognise and give space to a more nuanced understanding of agency in which it is not only understood as a property of human subjects but also as emerging in the entanglements and networks of different entities. At the same time, it points to the trans-corporeal relationship between the Khanty people and the river as it underlines how the people and other entities ‘are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world’ (Alaimo, 2018, p. 435). Mika Perkiömäki (2017) also noted the trans-corporeal connectedness of people and a riverine ecosystem in his analysis of Viktor Astaf’ev’s *Queen Fish* (*Tsar’-ryba,* 1976). According to his interpretation, Astaf’ev’s way of describing the river’s food chain – which consists of gnats, fish, and people – underlines how they all depend on the river and become one through the flow of matter and substances between human and non-human bodies (Perkiömäki, 2017, pp. 158–159). In a similar way, Aipin’s narration points to the oneness of the river and the beings depending on it.

Mapping temporalities

In addition to the river’s geographical map-making agency, it also appears as a temporal map that maps the past of the Khanty people. By mapping the physical locations of the Khanty families, whose members of different generations characterise the history and flow of time, the river turns into a metaphorical ‘river of life and time’ (Lagunova, 2007, p. 68). On the other hand, as a physical watercourse, the river evokes memories in individual Khanty characters with its material composition. For example, as Dem’ian travels alongside the river, memories of a boat journey in the

opposite direction with a Russian doctor, Marina, 'flow along the way towards him' (Aipin, 2014, p. 55). The memory of Marina becomes inscribed in the riverscape, and the shapes of every springlike swamp, every autumn colour, every curve in the river, and every lake shore' remind Dem'ian of Marina who is 'everywhere around him: in colours, voices, the contours of woods, and his land' (Aipin, 2014, p. 281). At the same time as Dem'ian's journey proceeds, the narrator takes the reader to Dem'ian's memories of the same journey from a long time ago. For one of Dem'ian's kinsmen, the river gives rise to a memory of his son's fall in the Second World War, and for him, the physical river turns into a symbolical 'river of eternity' along which the lost son 'sails away' instead of 'sailing across these waters' (Aipin, 2014, p. 49). The 'river of time' eventually becomes a 'river of eternity' in Dem'ian's case too as the novel ends in his death, and the last journey he makes to the village alongside the river is also his last journey into his personal memories and back.

The memories that the river gives rise to in the Khanty characters are extremely personal, those of desire, loss and grief. Yet these individual memories are connected with the broader Soviet history and society. The Second World War, in which the old Khanty man's son fell, and the fraternity of peoples are important symbols and building material for the Soviet identity and a sense of Soviet history. However, the memories that arise from the river do not follow the national discourses of heroic deeds, victory over fascism, a multi-ethnic Soviet people or proletarian internationalism that dominate the discussion on these themes. Jane Costlow and Arja Rosenholm (2017, p. 5) pointed to water's interconnectedness with the subconscious and repressed; in Aipin's novel, the flowing water also brings back marginalised and even suppressed memories: personal grief instead of national celebration, sexual desire instead of platonic comradeship. In this sense, the river in Aipin's novel shares a similar destabilising potential as that which Withold Bonner (2017) reads into the sea in Anna Seghers' novella *Überfahrt* (1971), in which the fluidity and ambiguity of the water undermines the binary oppositions of the time in which the work was written. Just as the ever-flowing water of the river raises buried objects to its surface, the constant movement of the river in Aipin's novel cannot let the bottled-up memories lie at the bottom of the mind.

Because of this capacity to bring out suppressed memories, it is no wonder that Demyan shares his memories of Khanty's bear feast specifically during the river journey with Marina. This memory is narrated in a detailed, nine-page-long description of a five-day feast held in order to return a killed bear's soul back to the forest. If the river evokes in Dem'ian a personal and silenced memory of a women he once desired, the moment of remembering and recounting a feast of great importance to his family and people reveals the river's ability to also surface supressed (or at least marginalised) collective memories. As the bear feast that Dem'ian recounts step by step is a piece of cultural

memory (Assmann, 1992; Assmann, 1999) the river not only evokes individual supressed memories but also communal ones and followingly the communal identity of the whole Khanty community. This capacity to strengthen the Khanty people's self-identity demonstrates how '[r]iver narratives […] are essential parts of cultural history' and how 'the perception and representation of a river' not only create cultural narratives for empires such as Russia but also for marginalised and subjugated communities (Costlow & Rosenholm, 2017, p. 3).

Within the novel's context, in which the surrounding society favours a national Soviet identity instead of minor ones, the attachment to a local river as the basis of one's identity becomes a way of resisting the superimposed, unifying master narratives of the state. This becomes evident when Dem'ian's sons, Mikul' and Iuvan, visit a monument for the fallen soldiers of their home region. The monument represents Pierre Nora's (1996) *lieu de mémoire* ('realm of memory') *par excellence* as it is a symbolic site to which a memory or a history is attached. However, instead of being a real and lived environment of that memory, a setting 'in which memory is a real part of everyday experience' (Nora, 1996, p. 1), the lieu de mémoire is rather a reminder of the past. According to Nora (1996) it serves a collective purpose by participating in the reconstruction of a 'commemorative consciousness' (p. 6), a sense of the shared history of a community that would be swept away if the material symbols were to disappear. Correspondingly, the monument of the Second World War is meant to reconstruct a memory of the war as a part of Soviet history, a unified narrative of the past of the Soviet people. However, in Dem'ian's sons the monument leads them to recall different memories to those of the official history writing as they both connect the names of fallen kinsmen on the obelisk with the rivers of their home region. When Mikul' reads the list of names, he complements each name with the name of the river along which the person's family originates. He constantly asks: 'From which river? From which family? Did they leave behind any relatives on this land? Do they remember them?' (Aipin, 2014, p. 333). Also, Iuvan recalls a story of some parents who escorted their son to the war front down the river by boat. In their minds, the river preserves the intimacy and the communicativity of the memory that the monument ineluctably loses according to Nora. Whereas the monument symbolizes a historical memory belonging to no specific individual but to the abstract yet discursively dominant nation, the flowing rivers entail local memories of the fallen soldiers that their relatives keep alive by continuing their lives besides the river.

Settler-colonial mapping and oil

As pointed out above, the river in Aipin's novel can be read as a natural map that both shows the geographical distribution of the Khanty families in the region and reflects the symbolic and

embodied interconnectedness of the Khanty people with the river and their riverine home area. In the novel this organic map that underlines the entanglement of humans and their non-human environment is juxtaposed with another kind of a map, one made by Russian oil seekers to locate oil deposits and mark oil pipes across the taiga: 'They go according to a paper that has the earth's face drawn on it: lakes and rivers, forests, swamps and streams, hills and valleys of the taiga. That drawing they call a map.' (Aipin, 2014, p. 41.) Several scholars have pointed out how, – especially in a Canadian context (see, e.g. Hoogeveen, 2015; Simpson, 2019; Schmidt, 2020) – natural resource extraction and the geological search for new resource deposits are settler-colonial techniques that lead to the dispossession and destruction of Indigenous lands and that naturalise the settler state's claim for the territory. In this sense, the oil seekers' search for new oil deposits in Aipin's novel appears as a similar settler-colonial technique as it leads to corresponding results in Khantys' home area. Therefore, the oil seekers' map that Dem'ian recalls is not a mere representation of the region but a piece of settler-colonial apparatus that aims at taking over the region and the natural resources it contains.

If the novel's literary cartography of the river offers an example of mapping with a non-human environment rather than considering the river as a mere object of mapping, the oil seekers' map of the area resonates with Cecilia Chen's (2013, p. 280) reading of oil rigs. She understands them as apparatuses that mirror an instrumentalised view of the non-human world as they concentrate on viewing the ocean solely from the perspective of exploitation opportunities. In a similar way, the maps of the Russian oil seekers reflect a corresponding instrumentalist thinking that disregards the interests of both non-human entities and Indigenous people. The geologists move straight forward without considering any of the elements that constitute the space outside of its cartographic representation and occupy the space through a linear, superimposed motion. A line on the map becomes a sign of destruction as the oil seekers 'drill along it deep into the soil and place, in 20 meters deep, something like gun powder that bangs and shoots deep into the ground' (Aipin, 2014, p. 41). However, the environmental damage appears as a sign of power in the eyes of oil seekers and drillers as they 'brag about how nothing stays alive in a ten-kilometre-wide area on their route' (Aipin, 2014, p. 42).

The difference in the ways in which Khanty people and the oil seekers see the region and its non-human environment becomes evident through Dem'ian's thoughts on the oil seekers' map. Whereas the oil seekers see the map as a description of a formerly valueless taiga that attains value through the oil deposits, Dem'ian sees the region and Khanty life as interconnected with each other:

> Probably Dem'ian's winter dwelling was marked in it with a pen as well as a cone-shaped granary made of laths, a fish house meant for storing fish, meat, and hunting equipment. […] On the right shore of Iukhan-Iagun was the spring dwelling of the family – huts carved out of poles with shingle roofs. […] The map did not lack the family's summer house on the Woodside river either. […] Also, the family's autumn house on the swamp area of the great river, in the middle of centuries-old pines on the edge of a sand cliff fit on the map. (Aipin, 2014, p. 41)

Dem'ian's way of engaging with the space follows the seasonal changes of the non-human environment and is based on his movement across the region. The dwellings of his family are built to fit in the non-human surroundings, their locations and descriptions reflect the knowledge and respect for different watersheds or 'centuries old pines'. They mirror the way in which Khanty life is rooted in the environment. This rootedness appears as an embodied experience as Dem'ian senses the threat that the oil seekers pose to his home physically as 'sharp furrows scored onto his heart' (Aipin, 2014, p. 43). The fear and pain that the oil seekers awoke in Dem'ian's mind reveal his feeling of powerlessness in front of the Russian oil seekers and demonstrates how he understands his claim to the land as subordinate in relation to the settler power. Even if Dem'ian refers to himself as the 'host' of his land, he is aware of the marginal authority he has over the land when it is dispossessed by the settler state in its search for natural resources. As the embodiedness of Dem'ian's fears suggests, the destruction of Indigenous peoples' lands and homes destroys the very basis of their life.

The contrast between the oil seeker's map and the liquid map of the river creates a juxtaposition between the oil and the river, the two liquids flowing on and under the ground. These concrete and material fluids are entangled in manifold webs of discourses, desires and imaginaries. The inseparability of what is imagined and what is material in Aipin's descriptions of flowing water and oil bring forth Gaston Bachelard's (1983) argument on using the interconnectedness of imaginary concepts and material entities to express abstract ideas. In the novel, the river appears as an element that is ultimately connected with life as its physical flow is parallelised with the flows of life, time and memories and, at the same time, it sustains the organic life of the Khanty people by providing them with the necessary living conditions. Mika Perkiömäki (2021) has noticed a similar tendency to imagine and present the major Siberian rivers in Russian village prose texts as 'rivers of life'. He The metaphor 'underline[s] the common history, interdependency and fate of the river and the people' and 'connects to the active, agentic river, whose actions have implications for both human culture and the more-than-human world' (Perkiömäki, 2021, p. 110). He also noticed a prevailing metaphor of the 'river of death' that present the river as 'dangerous and lethal' or as related to environmental damage and contamination (p. 107). In contrast to Perkiömäki's observations, the river and the water in Aipin's novel do not bear any lethal connotations as the deadly characteristics

are attached to the oil. The oil, depicted as 'the black, hot grease' (Aipin, 2014, p. 24) that flows in the black pipes, becomes a literal stream of death as oil pumping destroys the environment for both human and non-human entities. The notion of death is drawn on the geologists' maps as well as the lines marking out possible oil deposits signify destruction for everything that gets in the way of those lines. If the river serves as a live, flowing and constantly transforming map of the watery milieu that connects the lives of the Khanty people with the non-human entities with which they share and co-constitute the space they inhabit, the streams of the oil draw a map that enforces settler-colonial power and an instrumentalised view of the non-human world. Whereas the river adapts to the relief of the environment and sustains the ecosystems and living entities to which it is connected, the oil reserves lead to constructions of straight railway- and pipelines whose builders 'cut down pine woods, covered swamps, built bridges over big and small rivers' (Aipin, 2014, p. 24).

The fear that the oil seekers provoke in Dem'ian is based on what he has heard from the regions where oil is already pumped. The novel's temporally non-linear narrative structure reveals to the reader that his concern is not in vain by revealing the destructive development of the region to the reader through the narrative line that follows Dem'ian's son Mikul'. Even if Aipin's novel entails depictions of brute acts of violence, especially in the flashbacks depicting the purges of the 1930s, the main narrative strategy of presenting colonial violence in the novel is to underline the long-term impacts of the settlers and the environmental colonialism experienced by the Khanty people. In the next section of this article, I argue that the depiction of the settler-colonial violence in the novel can be read through Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence. In my view, Aipin's novel offers a demonstrative example of how slow violence can constitute different interrelated and cumulative processes that have a destructive effect on both subaltern groups of people and the non-human world.

Flows of slow violence

As presented earlier in this article, Nixon's slow violence is a concept that is used to describe gradual violence, the effects of which are only visible in the long term or/and in the distance, effects that may not be even recognised as violence. This graduality and temporal dispersal is visible in Aipin's novel, and whereas Nixon (2011, p. 3) pointed out what challenges presenting slow violence might face, Aipin's work resolves this problem through its narrative structure. When the narration of the novel leaps back and forth between the past, present and the future, violent causal connections whose consequences are not revealed during one's lifetime or during a generation are made visible. In particular, the narrator's tendency to move into the future and narrate Mikul's

experiences in adulthood sheds light on the disastrous results of the Soviet policies and resource extraction.

Despite the novel's anachronism, the reader can distinguish the development of the region since the establishment of the Soviet power and the arrival of oil seekers. In the beginning of Dem'ian's journey, he recalls a time 'when he did not think of anything other than hunting and fishing' and 'a peace lived in his soul'. That peace is ended when 'new people appeared on the Vat'ëgan river to build a metal road' (Aipin, 2014, p. 23), and at the time of Dem'ian's journey, '[t]he bottomlands in the East were split in two by a pipe;there was oil in the South and a railway line in the West" (p. 42). The consequences of Soviet policies for the Khanty's home region are already present by the time Dem'ian makes his journey: the hunters' hunting areas of the 'lowest river' have been destroyed, alcohol consumption is slowly increasing, and Khanty families suffer from a lack of reindeer, the most important companion of Indigenous hunters moving across the taiga. However, only the narrator's leaps to the1980s with Dem'ian's grown-up son Mikul' reveals the tragic development of the situation.

Mikul's experiences and observations in his home region underline the interconnectedness of the resource extraction, environmental degradation and wilting of the Indigenous community:

> Under the pressure of geologists and oil men the village slowly fell in anto economic depression. First, the cooperative lost its reindeer herd of 300 reindeer, then its cows and horses. Growing vegetables ended due to a lack of fertilizers. Game and fish disappeared due to contamination of lakes and rivers and unreasonable logging. That forced people to close down the fox farm. (Aipin, 2014, p. 265)

The environmental degradation and animal loss that bring an end to the traditional livelihoods is followed by alienation of Native children from their parents' culture as boarding schools move further away from the taiga and into urban centres. All these factors are depicted as interrelated and leading to the gradual decline of the Native people. Therefore, Aipin's description of the consequences of settler colonialism is in line with Wakeham's (2021) notes on slow, attritional violence leading to the annihilation of Indigenous societies, social practices and cultures with a genocidal effect (cf. Wolfe, 2006).

The correlation between environmental damage and social decline is illustrated through the interconnectedness of the settler-colonial flows of death, oil and spirits. In the same way that the people who map the region and extract its oil come to the taiga from outside, spirits are also brought there from elsewhere. Yet, it is the river along which alcohol is transported: 'The river did its job: it fed and watered. But it did not only give clear water to drink. A regular transportation of boxes

with alcohol bottles to the village began ten years later' (Aipin, 2014, p. 125). The same river that connects the Khanty families with each other and connects the Khanty people with the region also connects the area with other parts of the country, and the river flow carries the alcohol that then flows down the Khanty people's throats. However, the 'era of the bottle' (Aipin, 2014, pp. 125–126) only starts after the arrival of the oil seekers and the village they establish, where 'the shops are open without a break and during the weekends' (p. 125). The intersections of these different flows bring out the embodied character of the relationship between the Khanty people and their home region. As these liquids flow between different regions, as well as between human bodies and the non-human environment, they point to the porosity of their interfaces in a trans-corporeal way and show how inseparable human bodies are from their material surrounding. When the oil extraction and consequent environmental damage are approached through the oil's interconnectedness with spirits and how it spills over the region with the geologists, environmental problems and the alcoholism among the Khanty people cannot be seen as separate phenomena. Instead, they appear as a continuation of the same 'flow of death'. Whereas the geologists following the flowing oil 'dig up the forests and the endless swamps' (Aipin, 2014, p. 42), the spirits flowing with the geologists 'takes' one Khanty person after another. The rampant alcoholism in the region is not only a social consequence of the natural resource extraction but also a continuum of the settler-colonial slow violence in different human and non-human bodies.

After all, in the novel the alcohol-related deaths of the Khanty people seem almost less tragic than the break of the communicative and cultural memories, which not only destroys individuals but also the Indigenous people as a nation. The Russian literary scholar Ol'ga Lagunova (2007, p. 123) pointed out the importance of memory for the survival of the people by comparing Dem'ian's recount of the bear feast to an event taking place in the future, after Dem'ian's journey. In this event, Dem'ian's son, Mikul', contacts his old relative Galaktion Kurpelak in order to hear old songs and stories, but the old man, who has lost all his relatives to alcohol, states: 'My mind is empty, my words have run off. What stories there were … In this century of sufferings.' (Aipin, 2014, p. 260). In the contrast between these scenes, Lagunova (2007, p. 123) sees the end of an era in the history of the Khanty people, a change from the time when stories, myths and rituals are carried in people's mind to one when they have disappeared from memory:

> The space of the feast, in which everyone knew when and what they were supposed to do and say, and the space of the seemingly boundless fairy tale that joins together everything alive, entails all times and unites generations, have fallen apart: the elderly people have left and the young ones do not remember. […] And so comes the end, the end for all: for songs, fairy tales, feasts, family, home, Land [*sic*], life. (Lagunova, 2007, p. 123.)

As Lagunova points out, when Galaktion Kurpelak lets go of the tales and stories he used to tell, the cultural memory of the Khanty people is not transmitted from one generation to another. Whereas Mikul's father has participated in the bear feast himself and is therefore able to recall its course and related songs, for Mikul' the oral tradition of the Khanty remains a vague recollection from childhood. The following generation will have no personal experience of the national feasts or folklore. The break in the communicative chain of memory between different Khanty generations stifles the live and natural flow of the cultural memory and solidifies it into Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, forming lifeless symbols that merely represent the Indigenous community rather than reconnect to it. This is already the case with one distant relative of Mikul' who 'collects exhibits of Khanty's applied arts for an exhibition of the Achievements of National Economy' in Moscow (Aipin, 2014, p. 262). Gradually, the vivid Indigenous culture turns into a curiosity and a symbolic demonstration of the multi-ethnicity of the Soviet Union until it becomes a remnant of an extinct community. As a result of alcohol abuse, the break of the communicative and cultural memories cannot be separated from oil drilling and its environmental consequences, and hence, the thoroughness of the following devastation of the Khanty people is comparable to the destruction of the taiga caused by the natural resource extraction.

Conclusion

The interconnectedness of Indigenous peoples and their Native land, as well as the devastating consequences of settler colonialism and resource extraction, are widely recognised in the North American context. However, in Russian studies, postcolonialism as a theoretical framework has not yet reached its full potential when discussing the fates of Indigenous peoples in Russia and the former Soviet Union. In my reading of Eremei Aipin's *Khanty, or the Star of the Dawn*, I wished to show how Aipin addresses the nexus of environmental destruction and the gradual degradation of his people in such a way that underlines the mutual correlation between the two. In Aipin's novel, this degradation of his people is both physical and cultural, and it is parallel to the devastation of the non-human environment with which the Indigenous life is entangled.

The non-human environment does not only provide the material basis for the Native people, it is also the source of the living collective memory that passes on from one generation to another and keeps the Indigenous community alive. In Aipin's novel, this entanglement of the non-human environment and Indigenous culture is most apparent in the narration about the river on which the Khanty people's lives depend, the river that connects the Khanty people with each other as well as with other places. The river is a piece of cultural memory that serves as a collective symbol for the northern Indigenous people, but even more, it illustrates the Khanty people's epistemological views

and understanding of themselves in relation to the surrounding world. The river's role in transmitting the Indigenous epistemology becomes evident in its cartographic function as a watery map that, like any other map, is not only a spatial representation but a means of knowledge production as well. Hence, as the narrator creates the novel's literary cartography using the cold northern water of the river, it reflects an epistemological view of both the non-human environment and the human. According to this view, they are not divided into a subject who maps and an object that is being mapped, they are fundamentally entangled.

In this sense, the river and its water are both a geographical denominator and a means of thinking that represent the relationship between a local Indigenous people and their native northern region. However, in a similar way to the way that the North, and especially the Arctic, are often taken as objects of Western (or, geographically speaking, southern) 'control and knowledge' (Huggan, 2016, p. 7), the Khanty people's home region is taken over by the oil seekers from southern parts of the country. They arrive with maps that stem from a completely opposite epistemological basis than that upon which the map that is drawn with the river as their maps demonstrate a radical separation from and an instrumentalised view of the non-human environment. If it is the cold water of the river that is emblematic of the northern Indigenous epistemology and way of thinking, the flowing 'hot grease' (oil) and alcohol represent the colonial, southern/Western epistemology in which the non-human environment is subdued to serve human interests. As the region is mapped anew according to these 'hot' liquids, instead of being mapped according to the cold water, the supersession of local epistemology appears as one of the forms of settler-colonial violence that eventually leads to the annihilation of Indigenous Khanty culture that the novel depicts.

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