

## Writing Vulnerable Worlds:

### Language, Temporality, and Worldmaking in Nineteenth Century Narratives of Siberian Exile and Prison Life

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On his descent through Hell, close to its bottom, Dante comes upon a giant, locked up in chains. Virgil, who serves as Dante's guide, identifies him as Nimrod, the Hebrew king who instigated the building of the Tower of Babel; and he explains what horrible punishment he for this reason has to endure: "this is Nimrod, through whose wicked thought one single language cannot serve the world. Leave him alone—let's not waste time in talk; for every language is to him the same as his to others—no one knows his tongue." Nimrod himself utters but one unintelligible sentence—"*Raphael mai amech izabi almi*"—before Dante and Virgil move along, leaving him like they found him: banished from the face of the earth, despairing in complete linguistic isolation (Inferno XXXL. 77–81, 67).<sup>1</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, more than 300,000 people were living in exile or in prison camps in Siberia (Beer 2016: 28). Most of them were illiterate and without means to let people know about their fates. "I'll die, 'n' so ever'thin'll disappear, like it ne'er happened," as one penal laborer lamented (quoted in Iakubovich 2014: 175). Yet some prisoners did write about their experiences, and made attempts to speak also on behalf of those whose own words failed: to let the world know what life was like "in the world of the outcasts," an expression which was also used as a title for one prominent autobiography.<sup>2</sup> Several such writers made references to Dante's pilgrimage. "I feel that this is Inferno; I am Dante, and that my investigations might be called 'Studies in Hell,'" wrote Benjamin Howard (1902: 265), one of the authors I focus on. Peter Kropotkin (1971 [1887]: 124–125), Vlas Doroshevich (2011 [1903]: 13–14, 129), and Elsa Brändström (1921: 61), along with many others, made similar comments.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the exiled prisoners suffered a fate not

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Allen Mandelbaum.

<sup>2</sup> Pëtr Filippovich Iakubovich, *In the World of the Outcasts: Notes of a Former Penal Laborer*. 2 vols. Translated by Andrew A. Gentes (London: Anthem Press, 2014 [1895–98]).

<sup>3</sup> For references to Dante in texts about Siberia, see also Beer (2016: 129, 164); Robert Berry, "First Descents into the Inferno: Parallel Ideology and Experience in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and Dostoevsky's 'Notes from the House of the Dead,'" *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, w *Zealand Slavonic Journal* (1997), pp. 3–21; and Cathy Popkin, "Chekhov as Ethnographer: Epistemological Crisis on Sakhalin Island," *Slavic Review* 51(1): 36–51.

entirely unlike that of Nimrod and the other condemned souls Dante encountered: locked up in chains and banished, in Chekhov's (1989 [1895]: 4) phrase, to "the end of the world," they were left to perish in despair. No wonder, then, that they longed, like those in *Inferno*'s "eternal banishment" (*Inferno* XXIII. 126),<sup>4</sup> for someone who would write their stories down, and report back to the world of the living.<sup>5</sup> Those who did had instead to overcome another kind of problem, a predicament they shared, in fact, with Dante himself: "Who ever could, e'en with untrammelled words, / Tell of the blood and of the wounds in full / Which now I saw, by many times narrating?" (*Inferno* XXVIII. 1–3).<sup>6</sup>

### Exile and Anthropology

This chapter inquires into Siberian exile writing from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It draws on an investigation of more than twenty books, published in the second half of the nineteenth and early part of twentieth centuries. Some of these books are works of literature (e.g., Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*, 1861–62; Dmitry Mamin-Sibiryak, *Ural Stories*, 1895; Pëtr Iakubovich, *In the World of the Outcasts*, 1895–98; William Murray Graydon, *Exiled to Siberia*, 1897; Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 1899; and Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, 1911); others are memoirs (e.g., Ewa Felinska, *Revelations of Siberia*, 1852; Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 1899; Marie Sukloff, *The Life-Story of a Russian Exile*, 1914; and Ivar Hasselblatt, *Banished to Siberia*, 1917); but most of them belong to non-fiction genres such as travel writing, journalism, and ethnography (e.g., George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 1891; Anton Chekhov, *The Island of Sakhalin*, 1895; Jonas Stadling, *Through Siberia*, 1901; Benjamin Howard, *Prisoners of Russia*, 1902; Vlas Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, 1903; and Elsa Brändström, *Among Prisoners of War in Russia and Siberia 1917–1921*, 1921).

This corpus is the result of a deliberate analytical choice to move beyond "the nation and its literature," and to approach exile narratives instead in a context where world literature intersects with anthropology. Recent years has already seen the publication of texts that have begun to reassess the historical relationship between literature, anthropology, and ethnography (see, e.g., Debaene 2014; Izzo 2019; Kullberg 2013; Viktorin 2016; and Watson 2018). Exile itself is also somewhat of an anthropological key theme, empirically and as an analytic (for recent examples, see Hinkson 2018; Saleh 2018; and Viktorin 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> Translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Howard (1902: 23, 107).

<sup>6</sup> *Inferno* XXVIII.1–3

The discipline's own myth of origin, the tale about Malinowski's "war-exile" on the Trobriand Islands, suggests in addition intriguing resemblances between exile and the method of long-term ethnographic fieldwork (see, e.g., Kuklick 2008: 7–9; Kuper 1983: 9–12; and Young 2004: 289–307).

In Russia, the historical links between actual exile and the emergence of anthropology as a field science are even more distinct. Vladimir Bogoraz (1865–1936), Lev Shternberg (1861–1927), and Vladimir Jochelson (1855–1937), three of the "founding fathers" of anthropology in Russia, had all been banished to Siberia, and it was in exile that they first took an interest in the lives of indigenous peoples and began to conduct ethnographic work (see, e.g., Kan 2009; Krupnik 1996; Ssorin-Chaikrov 2008: 191–206). Siberia and exile are in other words related to both anthropology and writing—literally, metaphorically, and methodologically.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there are several examples of contemporary anthropologists who for this reason have returned to older exile texts from Siberia, neither as literature *per se*, nor as historical documents, but rather because of what they reveal about general anthropological issues—from the art of ethnographic writing to universal insights about exile and "the carceral condition."<sup>8</sup> The English translation of the title of Ewa Felińska's (1854) memoirs—*Revelations of Siberia*—is in other words telling. It points precisely to the relationship between exile and epiphany.

### Writing Siberian Exile

Banishment to Siberia reached its most infamous and deadly form with the Gulag system of forced labor camps during the Soviet era (see, e.g., Applebaum 2003; Barnes 2011; Jakobson 1993; Khlevniuk 2004). Along with historical research, a considerable corpus of Gulag memoirs and works of literature, which has continued to grow since the early 1950s, has played a major role in terms of providing insight into the camp system and its unspeakable circumstances of human suffering and death (Toker 2000, 2019).<sup>9</sup> While

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<sup>7</sup> See Izzo's discussion of the relation between fieldwork and what Michael Taussig has termed "writing work" (Izzo 2019: 5–8.)

<sup>8</sup> Kirin Narayan finds inspiration in Chekhov's *The Island of Sakhalin* (1895) for her discussion of ethnographic writing, and calls Chekhov her "ethnographic muse" in her book *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov* (Narayan 2012). Didier Fassin finds Dostoevsky's *Notes from a Dead House* helpful for thinking through his own ethnographic data on incarceration in his book *Prison Worlds: An Ethnography of the Carceral Condition* (Fassin 2017: 301–302).

<sup>9</sup> Classic Gulag memoirs include Gustaw Herling, *A World Apart* (1951); Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (1967) and *Within the Whirlwind* (1981); Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales* (1994); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (1975, 1978); and Alexander Dolgun & Patrick Watson, *Alexander Dolgun's Story: An American in the Gulag* (1975). Other memoirs,

inseparable from the Soviet regime of repression and thus in many ways historically unique, the Gulag is nevertheless part of a much longer and, indeed, still ongoing Russian history of exile and prison camps. As Leona Toker reminds us, the “history of the post-Stalinist Gulag is not yet encapsulated: the camps still exist in Putin’s Russia, though more as forced-labor prisons than as preextermination facilities” (Toker 2019: 207; see also Attius Sohlman 2019: 91–92). The Gulag was also preceded by a system of exile and prison camps that had existed in Siberia for more than three hundred years.<sup>10</sup> The scale and intensity of that system increased throughout the nineteenth century, with more than 1 million people being banished to Siberia between 1801 and 1917 (Beer 2016: 4). The historiography on prison and exile experience in late Imperial Russia, however, is expansive but remains limited (see Badcock 2016: 21–25).<sup>11</sup>

### Society, Science, Modernity

At the turn of the twentieth century, Siberian exile and prison life in pre-revolutionary Russia was well documented by contemporary writers. One of the first foreigners to write a book-length overview of exile and prisons in Siberia was the English priest, Henry Lansdell. In his *Through Siberia*, a two-volume book of almost 800 pages published in 1882, Lansdell criticizes almost all previous texts on the subject as “garnished accounts of horrible severities, which they [the authors] neither profess to have witnessed, nor attempt to support by adequate testimony” (Lansdell 1882b: 4). He then goes on to assert his own position of authority: “I have visited Russian houses of detention from the White Sea in the north to the

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published in the late 1990s, have more recently found their way into the mandatory corpus: e.g., Janusz Bardach & Kathleen Gleeson, *Man Is Wolf to Man: Surviving Stalin’s Gulag* (1998) and Lev Razgon, *True Stories* (1997). Recent years has also seen the publication of diaries and memoirs by Gulag guards: Ivan Chistyakov, *The Day Will Pass Away: The Diary of a Gulag Prison Guard 1935–1936* (2017) and Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir* (2011) are powerful examples. In addition, there exist a large literature of works of fiction about Gulag camps and Siberian exile under Stalin, e.g., Victor Serge’s *Midnight in the Century* (1939), Herta Müller’s prose poem *Hunger Angel* (2009), Sergei Lebedev’s novel *Oblivion* (2011), and Guzel Yakhina’s recent *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015).

<sup>10</sup> Alan Wood traces the exile system to 1582: “Although it was during the seventeenth century that punitive exile became fully established, there is evidence of its earlier use. The first unambiguous mention of *ssylka* occurs in a codicil to the Law Code (*Sudebnik*) of 1582, which specifies exile among the cossaks on the peripheries of Muscovy for certain crimes including perjury and sedition.” (Wood 2011: 120)

<sup>11</sup> Among the most important studies of Siberian exile and prison life in Imperial Russia are Bruce F. Adams, *The Politics of Punishment: Prison Reform in Russia 1863–1917* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); Sarah Badcock, *A Prison Without Walls? Eastern Siberian Exile in the Last Years of Tsarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Beer, *The House of the Dead*; Andrew A. Gentes, *Exile to Siberia, 1590–1822* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Andrew A. Gentes, *Exile, Murder and Madness in Siberia 1823–1861* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Abby M. Schrader, *Languages of the Lash: Corporal Punishment and Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); and Wood, *Russia’s Frozen Frontier*, pp. 118–142.

Black Sea and the Persian frontier in the south, and from Warsaw in the west to the Pacific in the east” (Lansdell 1882b: 5).

The Russian prince Peter Kropotkin, who had been incarcerated in prisons in Siberia, was among those who were not impressed by Lansdell’s work. In the preface to the 1906 Russian edition of his own book, *In Russian and French Prisons*, which originally had been published in English in 1887, Kropotkin called Lansdell a “Russian agent” (Kropotkin 1971 [1906]: xxi), and he dedicated an entire chapter to a critique of him:

The truth is that Mr. Lansdell has cast a hasty glance on what the authorities were willing to show him; that he has not seen a single central prison; and that had he visited every prison in Russia in the way he visited some of them, he still would remain as ignorant as he is now about the real conditions of prison-life in Russia. (Kropotkin 1971 [1887]: 233)

The book that subsequently came to be the most well known account of Siberian exile in Imperial Russia was published a few years later, in 1891. Written by the American George Kennan, who had traveled through Siberia along with the artist George Frost, *Siberia and the Exile System* was regarded by most Russian and foreign commentators as a trustworthy overview. Again, this is Kropotkin:

[T]he Russian ministers sought to make the same use [as they had made of Lansdell] of the Americans Kennan and Frost, who were sent by an American journal to check the conditions of Russian prisons on the spot. But they were foiled. For Kennan learned Russian, got acquainted with the exiles in Siberia, and truthfully recorded what he learned. (Kropotkin 1971 [1906]: xxii)

The Russian government, however, as Bruce Adams notes in his book, *The Politics of Punishment* (1996), was not overly thrilled with what Kennan had written.

After Kennan’s book appeared they [the Russian government] attempted to counter its impact by, apparently, commissioning a well-known English traveler-journalist, Harry deWindt, who had written admiringly about the administration of Siberia in a popular travel book in 1889, to write a rebuttal to Kennan. DeWindt returned to Siberia under the auspices of the government, and in 1892 he published a favorable account of the exile system. It did not have the impact the Russians desired, however. His account of Siberia was too rosy, and his connections to official Russia were too apparent. [...] Skeptical of what seemed to be a put-up job and not generally well disposed to the Russian government, reviewers found in favor of Kennan’s version. (Adams 1996: 6)

The decades at the turn of the previous century, when these debates took place, was a time when art, literature, religion, and science went through significant transformations in response to processes of increasing urbanization, industrialization, and secularization, (see, e.g., Butler 1994; Taylor 2004). Along with these developments, novel questions about the human condition under modernity came into view. More specifically, debates about prisons and the Siberian system of exile were connected to a transnational re-problematization of

crime and punishment and to nascent ethical configurations of the human. This time also saw the development of the modern social sciences, including anthropology. Indeed, the period from the late 1890s to the late 1910s was in Russia characterized by a remarkable flowering of the visual, literary, and performing arts, and by extraordinary progress in the sciences. It is for this reason sometimes referred to as “the Russian Silver Age” (Bowlit 2008: 9–10; 26). Significantly for my discussion of exile writing, the period also coincides with what John Stephan (1971: 74) has termed “Sakhalin’s Dark Ages,” 1875–1905, which suggests that the optimism in scientifically ordered progress in fact coexisted with dark undercurrents of pessimism that pointed toward the contingency, frailty, and reversibility of change (Beer 2008: 31).

### Worldmaking

Historical exile in Siberia is my locus but not my object of study.<sup>12</sup> I explore *Siberian exile writing* from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as *anthropological sources* that have something to tell us about *worldmaking* in terms of language and temporality. Such intangible qualities cannot be separated from the ways through which they appear. To investigate them we must thus pay attention to complex empirical phenomena; but we must not reduce them to the particular contexts that happened to render them visible. In fact, I am mostly interested in aspects of worldmaking that transcend their historical conditions of emergence. As such, it makes sense to consider nineteenth century exile writing in relation not only to Gulag literature, but also to prison memoirs, exile narratives, and travel writing much more generally. Thereby I hope to open up a discussion of worldmaking at the intersection of anthropology and world literature.

Research in the field of world literature has in fact increasingly turned toward questions of worldmaking (see, e.g., Cheah 2016; Ganguly 2016; Hayot 2012), and this shift has opened new points of conceptual convergence between literature and anthropology, not least in relation to the problem of how literary worlds relate to the lived world (Hayot 2011: 137; Helgesson et al. 2018: 165–286; Viktorin 2019). By placing my inquiry at a point where these disciplines intersect, my ultimate aim here is to ferret out what narratives about

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<sup>12</sup> As Clifford Geertz famously put it: “The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods...); they study *in* villages. You can study different things in different places, and some things—for example, what colonial domination does to established frames of moral expectation—you can best study in confined localities. But that doesn’t make the place what it is you are studying” (Geertz 1993: 22, his emphasis).

Siberian exile and prison life from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could tell us about language, temporality, and other anthropological aspects of worldmaking.

### The Problem of Witnessing

Located just a few miles off the northeastern coast of the Eurasian continent, across the mouth of the Amur River, Sakhalin Island was one of the most dreaded penal colonies of Siberia (see Beer 2016: 241–269; Corrado 2010). It was also an exile location that roused the curiosity of many contemporary travelers and writers (Stephan 1971: 74–75).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many different kinds of people—exiles, prisoners, scientists, missionaries, travelers, journalists, and so on—traveled to Sakhalin or other parts of Siberia and wrote about their experiences. Books on Siberia also appeared in various languages, including Danish, English, Norwegian, Polish, and Swedish. The cultural, geographical, and linguistic heterogeneity of Siberian exile writing is in other words noteworthy.<sup>14</sup> Siberia itself was in fact also decidedly diverse, in terms of the ethnic and national origins of its inhabitants, which in some places had given rise to a cosmopolitan atmosphere (see, e.g., Ingemanson 1996). The exiles themselves, finally, comprised a far from homogenous category. In the following scene, George Kennan inspects a convict barge, ready to depart from Tiúmen:

The exiles, although uniformly clad in gray, presented from an ethnological point of view, an extraordinary diversity of types, having been collected evidently from all parts of the vast empire. There were fierce, wild-looking mountaineers from Daghestán and Circassia, condemned to penal servitude for murders of blood-revenge; there were Tatárs from the lower Vólga, who had been sunburned until they were almost as black as negroes; Turks from the Crimea, whose scarlet fezzes contrasted strangely with their gray convict overcoats; crafty-looking Jews from Podólia, going into exile for smuggling; and finally, common peasants in great numbers from all parts of European Russia. (Kennan 2012a [1891]: 114)

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<sup>13</sup> “From the Treaty of St. Petersburg (1875) until the Russo-Japanese War (1904),” writes Stephan, “Sakhalin hosted an unprecedented succession of foreign and Russian visitors, not all of whom were convicts. Bronislaw Pilsudski, brother of the Polish general and statesman Jósef Pilsudskki, came as an exile and did important research on the Ainu before fleeing the island during the Japanese invasion. Another exile, Lev Sjternberg, appointed himself director of the Aleksandrovsk Historical Museum during the 1890s while carrying out his ethnographical investigations. Anton Chekhov and Vasilií Doroshevich came especially to study the penal system. Their visits aroused particular interest from Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Korolenko, V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Maxim Gorki. [...] The English traveler, B. D. Howard, came to Sakhalin in 1890” (Stephan 1971: 74–75).

<sup>14</sup> If we take into account all those who for different reasons traveled to Siberia without writing about it, this heterogeneity becomes even more striking. There are several intriguing books that retrace such unpublished exilic experiences. Erik Appel (1998) has for example written a book in which he draws on letters, diaries, and other archival sources to retrace the story of a group of Swedish speaking Finns, who attempted to establish a collective in the Amur region in the mid-nineteenth century. Sergei Kan’s (2009) biography about Lev Shternberg, a prominent Russian anthropologist, documents in detail how Shternberg was banished to Siberia, and ended up spending seven years on the Island of Sakhalin. And Christine Sutherland (2001) has written the story of the Princess Maria Volkonsky, wife of one of the leaders of the 1825 Decembrist Rising, who spent twenty-nine years in Siberian exile (see also Attius Sohlman 2019: 138–175).

Within this multitude of experiences, I center on one recurrent aspect: how one could understand, explain, and express what one has observed or experienced. This might be called “the problem of witnessing,” and as such it relates to themes like language, representation, and truth; and thereby also to fundamental anthropological questions about the human condition.<sup>15</sup>

In the preface to the 2006 translation of *Night*, the Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel characterizes the problem of witnessing in the following way: “I knew that I must bear witness. I also knew that, while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. [...] It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language” (Wiesel 2018: XIV–XV). Wiesel here identifies three facets of the problem: the imperative to bear witness, the lack of appropriate words, and the need to reinvent language through literary work. One of the reasons that I opened this chapter by referring to Dante is that his *Commedia* arguably could be understood as a successful response to this problem thus conceptualized. By synthesizing literature and theology through a reinvention of vernacular poetry, Dante produced a text that transcended the particular location from which it was composed. Thereby he could convey truthfully what he felt was the eternal essence of Christianity. Indeed, one could argue, as does Peter S. Hawkins, that the larger effort of the *Commedia* was to rewrite the Bible: “Dante reimagined the world of the Bible and turned its sacred *figura* into his own literary ‘fulfillment.’ What this entailed most obviously was the transformation of biblical character, narrative, and typology into the vernacular of his imagination” (Hawkins 2007: 134, 139).

I mention this, because the “vernacular animation” at the heart of Dante’s literary work, is a feature that I find repeated to different degrees in several of the texts I explore. The fact that Dante has something to teach us here suggests in addition the importance of literature in overcoming the problem of witnessing.

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<sup>15</sup> In Latin there are two words for witness: “The first word, *testis*, from which our word ‘testimony’ derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (*\*terstis*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it” (Agamben 2004: 438).

## The End of the World

In 1890, the Russian author and playwright Anton Chekhov traveled across Siberia to Sakhalin, where he stayed for three months to conduct fieldwork.<sup>16</sup> In the arrival scene of his subsequent book, Chekhov characterizes Sakhalin as “the end of the world”:

Scarcely visible ahead is a hazy strip of land; this is the penal island. To the left, dropping away in its own convolutions, the shore disappears in to the haze on its way to the unknown North. This seems to be *the end of the world*, and there is nowhere else to go. The soul is seized with the same emotion which Odysseus must have experienced when he sailed an unknown sea, filled with melancholy forebodings of encounters with strange creatures. (Chekhov 1989 [1895]: 4, emphasis added)

“The end of the world,” which is a trope of Ovidian exile (“*Nobis habitabitur orbis / ultimus, a terra terra remota mea*”),<sup>17</sup> had previously been re-deployed in Russia by Pushkin (Kennedy 2011). Chekhov makes use of this and other literary references—“the same emotion which Odysseus must have experienced,” and so on—to convey what he felt when he came face to face with Sakhalin. To represent the island itself was another matter. In a letter to his publisher, written on his return trip, Chekhov reports that, “I saw *everything*; so the question now is not *what* I say, but *how* I say it.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it would seem that in order to comprehensively represent Sakhalin Island, Chekhov and other authors would need to think carefully about representation in a way that suggests that language itself had become problematic, and in a way had to be “reinvented.”

Perhaps this has to do with the fact that Sakhalin appears to be the end of the world not only in terms of geographical limits, but also in the sense of an ending: Sakhalin literally makes the world we used to know disappear. The journalist Vlas Doroshevich, who visited the island a few years after Chekhov, addresses precisely how the world from Sakhalin’s horizon seems to vanish:

Melancholy—aching, pinching, piercing the soul. Something sad hovers around me. You cannot believe that somewhere in the world there is an Italy, blue sky, warm sun, that there are songs and laughter in the world... Everything ever seen up to now seems so distant, as if on some other planet, as if it were dreamt, unreal, unfeasible. (Doroshevich 2011: 6)

Several other authors make similar observations. Benjamin Howard, for example, who traveled to Sakhalin in 1890, writes that “Sakhalin is the place of the dead; the world has

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<sup>16</sup> On Chekhov’s journey to the Island of Sakhalin, see, e.g., Friedlaender (1959: 115–128); Kleberg (2010: 106–127).

<sup>17</sup> “[M]y habitation is *the end of the world*, a land far removed from my own land” (Ovid, *Tristia*, 1.1: 127–128; translation by Duncan F. Kennedy, emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> Letter to A. S. Suvorin, the Gulf of Tartary, on the steamship Baikal, 11 September 1890. *Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, p. 97.

long become but a distant recollection” (Howard 1902: 265). When George Kennan characterizes the Siberian tundra, he deploys the same imagery: “the Siberian *tundra* not only becomes inexpressibly lonely and desolate,” he writes, “but takes on a strange, half terrible unearthliness, which awes and yet fascinates the imagination” (Kennan 2012a [1891]: 60). And Dostoevsky describes the Siberian prison in which he was incarcerated, as “unlike anything else; [...] an alive dead house, a life like nowhere else” (Dostoevsky 2015 [1862]: 8).

The references to death are not coincidental. Exile has of course repeatedly been compared to death (again, an Ovidian trope), but in the Siberian case the metaphor had particular resonance, because those exiled to Siberia were treated as if they were actually dead. “A person sentenced to penal servitude in Siberia is removed from normal human environment without any hope of ever returning,” writes Chekhov; “*he is dead* to the society in which he was born and bred. So the convicts say, ‘The dead never return from the grave!’” (Chekhov 1989: 214, emphasis added). Kennan explains:

As a general rule, exile to Siberia, under the severer sentences and for felony, involves first, deprivation of all civil rights; second, forfeiture of all property, which, upon the conviction of the criminal, descends to his heirs *as if he were dead*; and third, severance of all family relations, unless the criminal’s family voluntarily accompanies him to his place of exile. (Kennan 2012a: 82, emphasis added)

As such, Siberian exile seems to be located not only at the end of the world, but also outside of time. Even those who were not deported, travelers who knew that they would be returning home, seem to have felt something of this temporal dissonance. Chekhov explains how he became “overwhelmed with melancholy and anxiety,” and felt that he would “never be able to get away from Sakhalin” (Chekhov 1989: 45). Some of the people who spoke to him were unable to recall when they had arrived:

“When did you arrive on Sakhalin?” Very few of the Sakhalin dwellers answered this question immediately, without strain. The year he arrived on Sakhalin was the year of dire misfortune. Furthermore, they don’t even know the year, or have forgotten it. I asked an old convict woman when she had arrived on Sakhalin and she answered dully, without thinking, “Who knows? Maybe in ’83.” Either her husband or her lover interrupts, “So why do you wag your tongue for nothing? You came in ’85.” “Maybe in ’85,” she agrees with a sigh. (Chekhov 1989: 23–24)

Shared forms for expressing the passing of time seem to have been absent on Sakhalin. Without common time-space configurations, time never becomes truly social, and from a phenomenological perspective, such a “present without a future, or an eternal present, is precisely the definition of death” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 388).

It is perhaps not surprising that people who were exiled to “the end of the world” would tend to feel deprived of a future. Yet on Sakhalin, people in addition seemed to lack a past.

Nowhere are past times so quickly forgotten as on Sakhalin, and this is because of the extraordinary turnover in the convict population, which changes basically every five years, and partly because of the lack of accurate archives in the local offices. What transpired twenty to twenty-five years ago is considered to belong to a dark antiquity, already forgotten, lost to history. (Chekhov 1989: 196)

The exile literature also includes recurrent observations of the fact that there were very few elderly people living on Sakhalin, and that there were almost no old objects:

Where there are women and children, no matter how impoverished, the hut does resemble a household full of peasant life. Nevertheless there is a persistent feeling that something important is missing; no grandmother, no grandfather, no old paintings, no inherited furniture; consequently, the household contains nothing from the past, nothing traditional. (Chekhov 1989: 26)

Those who did have an older object in their possession treasured it as immensely valuable, as Benjamin Howard notes among so-called free convicts and their families: “great pains are taken by each person to wear something or other which is both an ornament and a souvenir of a former home” (Howard 1902: 93). Indeed, without such material manifestations of the past, worldmaking would fail. Hannah Arendt explains:

The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors. Human life, in so far as it is world-building, is engaged in a constant process of reification, and the degree of worldliness of produced things, which all together form the human artifice, depends upon their greater or lesser permanence in the world itself. (Arendt 1998 [1948]: 95–96)

Some people, the so-called vagabonds, deliberately tried to conceal their past, claiming not to remember who they were. “Many assumed sobriquets such as ‘Ivan Nepomnyashchy’ or ‘Ivan I-Don’t-Remember’. [...] Vagabonds thus assumed false names in a deliberate and brazen attempt to frustrate the authorities’ attempts to identify them. ‘Ivan I-Don’t-Remember’ proliferated, appearing in every exile settlement and penal colony across Siberia” (Beer 2016: 226).

Others lost their past in an even more radical way—by selling their identity. Dostoevsky’s *Notes from a Dead House* includes one of the most famous accounts of this custom. It is the story of Sushilov—“a very pitiful fellow, totally uncomplaining and humiliated, even downtrodden, though nobody in our barrack had trod on him, he was just

downtrodden by nature” (p. 70)—who had “exchanged” on the way to Siberia; that is, to change names, and therefore fates with someone:

For instance, some Mikhailov, sentenced for murder or some other capital offense, finds going to hard labor many years unbeneficial. Suppose he’s a clever fellow, an old hand, who knows his business; so he’s on the lookout for somebody in the same party who is of a simpler, more downtrodden, more uncomplaining sort, and whose sentence is comparatively lighter: a few years in a mill or a settlement, or even at hard labor, only for the shorter term. Finally, he comes across Sushilov. Sushilov is a house serf and is simply being sent to a settlement. He has already gone a thousand miles, naturally without a kopeck to his name, because Sushilov will never have a kopeck—he goes on, exhausted, worn-out, eating only government rations, without a fleeting bite of something good, in nothing but government clothes, serving everybody for pitiful small change. Mikhailov strikes up a conversation with Sushilov, makes his acquaintance, even becomes friends with him, and finally, at some stopping place, treats him to vodka. He finally makes the suggestion: how would he like to exchange? “I, Mikhailov, this and that, I’m going to hard labor, not really to hard labor, but to a ‘special section.’ It’s hard labor, but special, meaning better.” [...] Sushilov is a bit tipsy, a simple soul, filled with gratitude for Mikhailov’s kindness to him, and therefore does not dare to refuse. [...] They come to an agreement. The shameless Mikhailov, taking advantage of Sushilov’s extraordinary simplicity, buys his name from him for a red shirt and a silver ruble, which he gives him on the spot in front of witnesses. (Dostoevsky 2015: 71–72)

The story relates in particular ways to fate and to the authenticity of being. The prisoner is not himself, but someone else. He has lost both his past and his future. “On his legs are fetters—another’s. His crime—another’s. His fate—another’s. His name—another’s. No, now all this is not another’s, but his” (Doroshevich 2011: 209). While some people, like Sushilov, too easily gave up their fates for vodka or money, others, like Mikhailov, too readily took advantage of them.

The Siberian custom of changing fates is a radicalization of its mythological template: the Genesis story about how Jacob talks Esau into selling his birthright, simply by offering him some food, and later receiving his blessing too, by fooling his father, thus in practice exchanging fates with him.<sup>19</sup> The person who too easily merges with the present—who focuses too much on immediate satisfaction—rather than keeping a long-term perspective in mind, appears not to deserve what he has lost. Genesis seems to suggest that since Esau has “despised” his birthright, he “has no right to complain about his fate” (Shinan & Zaikovitch 2012: 156). Again, in Siberia this logic is repeated, even exaggerated, as fellow prisoners, according to several accounts, merely find it amusing to see how an exchange will unfold: “Will he hang himself?” (Doroshevich 2011: 209).

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<sup>19</sup> ”And Jacob prepared a stew and Esau came from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff, for I am famished.’ Therefore is his name called Edom. And Jacob said, ‘Sell now your birthright to me.’ And Esau said, ‘Look, I am at the point of death, so why do I need a birthright?’ And Jacob said, ‘Swear to me now,’ and he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off, and Esau spurned the birthright.” (Gen 25: 29–34)

The sense of the past being truly gone, helps explain why for many authors previous attempts to replicate Siberian exile and prison life seemed inadequate. Toward the beginning of his book, *In the World of the Outcasts*, for example, Pëtr Iakubovich eulogizes Dostoevsky as the untouchable literary master of Siberian exile writing.<sup>20</sup> Yet he also points out that so much has changed during the thirty years that had gone by since the publication of *Notes from a Dead House* that this book fails to speak to the present. Like Dante, who had to leave Virgil behind when he entered Paradise, and trust his own power of expression without the support of literary tradition, Iakubovich realizes that he ultimately has to face his task alone. But unlike Dante he is not in paradise, but in what appears to be hell.

Chekhov seems to have felt the same way, “as if we were in hell.”<sup>21</sup> But even “hell” turns out to be a concept unapt for capturing what exists on Sakhalin. Cathy Popkin has suggested that, for Chekhov, one of the most shocking aspects of Sakhalin was the fact that it diverged from the central notion of the myth of hell as represented for instance by Dante. While the forms of punishment in *Inferno* are often exceptionally cruel, they always correspond to particular crimes: the more serious the offence, the more terrible the punishment. This allows Dante to retain a sense of Divine justice. On Sakhalin such correspondence is missing (see, e.g., Chekhov 1989: 35; cf. also Doroshevich 2011: 123, 128). There appear to be no relation whatsoever between the crimes committed and the punishments meted out. This observation led Chekhov to experience what Popkin diagnoses as an “epistemological crisis” (Popkin 1992).

Situations when we fail in our capacity to read and produce signs, which Chekhov’s epistemological crisis is an example of, might be characterized as instances of “semiotic

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<sup>20</sup> Born in 1860 in Novgorod to a noble family, Iakubovitch was given the opportunity to study and eventually received degrees from Petersburg University, in history and philology. As a student he had become active in the student movement and had begun writing and publishing articles in several political journals. In the early 1880s he joined the revolutionary organization “The Will of the People,” which was part of the Russian populist movement, and he soon became one of its leading figures. He was arrested in November 1884 for this involvement, and was after three years in prison sentenced to death. Only minutes before he was about to be executed, he was pardoned and had his sentence changed to eighteen years of penal labor. After several years in a labor camp, in prison, and as an exile in Siberia, he was allowed in 1899 to return to European Russia. Although at this point Iakubovitch was weak from illness, he nevertheless became the co-editor, along with Vladimir Korolenko, for a literary journal in St. Petersburg. There are some striking parallels between Dostoevsky and Iakubovitch. Both of them were sentenced to death in political trials and pardoned in the very last minute; both of them were banished from European Russia, and spent time in Siberian prisons, labor camps, and in exile. Also, both of them wrote highly acclaimed fictionalized narratives based on their Siberian experiences. Yet despite these analogies, they also express extremely different views on reality and “the human.” During his time in prison, Dostoevsky deepened his religious beliefs and developed the Christian approach recognizable in many of his subsequent novels. In contrast, for Iakubovitch, the prison experience made him even more secular in his political and humanistic approach to contemporary Russian politics than he had been before. (For a discussion of Iakubovitch and Dostoevsky, see Jensen 1905: 215–219.)

<sup>21</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Sakhalin*, translated by Brian Reeves (London: One World Books, 2007), p. 53.

perplexity” (Toker 2019: 6). Semiotic perplexity constitutes a literary topos that recurs in much travel writing. Douglas Botting has for example suggested that Alexander von Humboldt and Aime Bonpland experienced semiotic perplexity—in the form of “sensory ecstasy”—when they arrived in the port of Cumaná, Venezuela, on 16 July 1799: “Nothing—no shape, no form, no voice, no colour, no smell—was familiar to them. Nothing would readily fit into their existing pattern of memory and experience, therefore everything seemed to demand equal attention” (Botting 1973: 76). This helps explain why even with the best will, and the greatest insistence on precise observation, early European observers “could not accurately record what they saw,” as Harry Liebersohn has pointed out: “human perceptions and the ability to communicate depend on the existing stock of cultural and intellectual knowledge, and a long process of rapprochement and growing familiarity had to take place before the peculiar contours of the New World could become visible” (Liebersohn 2008: 19).

Siberian exile writing of the nineteenth century comprises particularly illuminating examples of semiotic perplexity. Rather than gradually rendering visible a “New World,” these texts, which instead speak of “the end of the world,” illuminate a more radical challenge in terms of literary representation and worldmaking. Indeed, rather than Humboldt’s “sensory ecstasy,” travelers, exiles and prisoners in Siberia instead repeatedly speak of apathy (see, e.g., Howard 1902: 145, 179).<sup>22</sup> For Humboldt everything seemed to demand equal attention. In Siberia nothing matters anymore. Although emotionally reversed, the perplexity itself is founded on a situation when nothing seems to fit into existing patterns of memory and experience. Such disjunction of place, experience, language, and memory is constitutive of the exilic experience; hence the challenge of expression.

Frank Kermode (2000 [1966]) has written on “the sense of an ending” in relation to ways of making sense of the world. Understood as the end of the world, Sakhalin seems to call for a new beginning; that is, “the first step in the intentional production of meaning” (Said 1975: 5). In this process, authors make use of whatever means they have; they have to work on what already is “spoken,” in Merleau-Ponty’s (2012: 202–203) sense, in order to bring forth novel configurations that “speak.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Letter to A. S. Suvorin, the Gulf of Tartary, on the steamship Baikal, 11 September 1890. *Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, p. 97. See also Howard (1902: 145, 179).

<sup>23</sup> In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes the following helpful distinction between *speaking speech* and *spoken speech*: “In the former, the meaningful intention is in a nascent state. Here existence is

## Tropes and Truth

In 1897, the American author William Murray Graydon published a novel titled *Exiled to Siberia*. An adventure book for a youth audience in the west, it tells the story of two nineteen-year-old boys from the US, who travel to Russia where they find themselves falsely accused of espionage, and end up in Siberian exile. The boys manage to escape, and through an incessant succession of implausible events, they ultimately make it back home to America. Siberia functions in the novel as little more than a sensational setting for the adventurous plot. “In Russia,” as Graydon himself explains, “deeds are possible that no other country on the globe would tolerate” (Graydon 1900: 29). To evoke the right atmosphere, he makes repeated use of a number of tropes: that Siberia is the epitome of a remote place (“Before them stretched the dominions of the czar, an empire that reached thousands and thousands of miles across Siberian wastes and deserts to the far-away Pacific coast,” p. 24); that suffering in Siberia resists verbal representation (“The period of suffering and misery that began with the departure from Tomsk almost defies description,” p. 105); and that Siberian exile disrupts temporal orientation (“There were times when the boys found it difficult to convince themselves that the past was not all a dream,” p. 106).

Graydon’s book illustrates how Siberia, toward the end of the nineteenth century, had already become something of a literary character in its own right. As Lach Szyrma (1854) writes in his introduction to the English translation of Felińska’s memoirs: Siberia is “a region dreary by nature, and not only in name synonymous, but actually identical with a vast prison—a locality associated in our minds with the most poignant of human sufferings” (Szyrma 1854: v). Such clichés might have had political uses too. Benjamin Howard, who traveled to Sakhalin in 1890, dedicates several pages in his book, *Prisoners of Russia* (1902), to a discussion of the reputation of the island. He suggests that it was

the policy of the Russian Government to discourage any definite information about Sakhalin from reaching the Russian people; that it prefers to maintain the dreadful mysteriousness with which it is enshrouded, in order that the fear and horror of the place may have a deterrent and salutary effect upon the criminally inclined throughout the Empire. (Howard 1902: 58–59)

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polarized into a certain ‘sense’ that cannot be defined by any natural object; existence seeks to meet up with itself beyond being, and this is why it creates speech as the empirical support of its own non-being. Speech is the excess of our existence beyond natural being. But the act of expression constitutes a linguistic and cultural world, it makes that which stretched beyond fall back into being. This results in spoken speech, which enjoys the use of available significations like that of an acquired fortune. From these acquisitions, other authentic acts of expression—those of the writer, the artist, and the philosopher—become possible. This ever-recreated opening in the fullness of being is what conditions the first speech of the child and the speech of the writer, the construction of the word and the construction of concepts” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 202–203).

In the imagination of the nineteenth-century, then, Siberia—and perhaps Sakhalin Island in particular—was shaped to a large degree by the historical reality of imprisonment and exile. Harriet Murav (1993) has distinguished between two patterns, or “topographies,” among such literary representations in Russian literature—one secular, the other sacred. She observes how secular representations of Siberian wilderness sometimes conform to “the typically adverse environment in which the Romantic hero of early-nineteenth-century literature finds himself” (Murav 1993: 96). This is particularly the case in works of the so-called Decembrists. Represented in the image of a gloomy, uncivilized wilderness, Siberia “is almost an abstraction; it is a stage on which the Decembrist’s heroic deeds are enacted” (Murav 1993: 98). The writings on Siberia by the poet Bestuzhev, for example, clearly reveal the imprint of Romantic thought typical of his time: “Bestuzhev emphasizes the untouched quality of the landscape. He writes: ‘Not the human voice—only the rumble of thunder has from time to time disturbed the sleep of this half-awakened creation’” (Murav 1993: 99).

Murav’s discussion is helpful for our understanding of these kinds of images of Siberia, within Russian literature and beyond, and for an exploration of the textual lives of such literary modes. However, I want to move here in a somewhat different direction. I begin from the assumption that all authors must make use, in one way or the other, of modes of representation that are available to them. Rather than reducing their texts to examples of such already existing forms, I want to understand what—apart from the literary techniques they use—the texts seek or succeed to replicate. That is, I am interested in the problems to which texts respond, which means that I am interested in the relation between the texts and what they represent. Siberian wilderness itself, for example, seems to exhibit particular qualities, which cannot be reduced to what authors project onto an external reality. There is in fact a striking continuity—over time and across literary genres—when it comes to representations of the undomesticated nature of Siberia (see, e.g., Viktorin 2019: 46–48). It is of course easy to recognize time-specific literary forms and narrative tropes among such representations, from Bestuzhev’s romanticism to Graydon’s clichés. Yet something “before” these forms nevertheless also seems to appear: something more invariable which recurs through, but also in spite of, the formal qualities of particular textual representations.

For a discussion of anthropological facets of worldmaking, Siberian exile writing appears intriguing particularly in cases when Murav’s topographies fall short thus calling

for remediate literary work. That is, when the sacred mythological directionality conveyed through the Bible—the banishment from Eden, the divine imperative to farm the earth, and to build cities—collapse along both with its literary representations and its secular counterparts: colonization and modernization of the Russian Far East. I thus pay attention to situations when authors come face to face with what I characterize here as a profound “condition of silence.” Yet to “speak with the clarity of the poet,” according to Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, is precisely “to hear in the silence the babble of infinite combinations” (Zornberg 1993: 118–119, 108); and such word making—a form of “re-invention” of language itself really—is world-making (cf. Goodman 1978; Merleau-Ponty 2007: 241–282).

### Silences

If Sakhalin did not constitute a world, what, then, was it? Chekhov, Howard, and Doroshevich all characterize their impressions from the island in relation to silence:

It is always quiet in Dué [a Sakhalin village]. The ear soon becomes accustomed to the measured clang of chains, the roar of the surf and the hum of the telegraph wires, and because of these sounds the impression of dead silence becomes even stronger. [...] If someone unexpectedly happened to laugh out loud on the street, it would sound shrill and unnatural. (Chekhov 1989 [1895]: 74)

[T]he song of birds is an unknown sound. This all-pervading silence deepens, if possible, the dreaminess of the forests, in which the deadliness of the solitude finds its most dismal expression. (Howard 1902: 313)

There is a deathly silence. Only the crunching of wind-fallen branches underfoot. Stop, and there's no sound. No bird sings, not a peep... One is awestruck, as if in an empty church. The silence of the Sakhalin taiga—it is the stillness of a desolate abandoned cathedral beneath whose arches no whispered prayers are heard. (Doroshevich 2011 [1903]: 6)

Silence signifies the end of the world in the sense that it appears as “non-human.” While sounds and silences are significant and signifying of place, language is in contrast something uniquely human. Speech implies intentionality and meaning, a notion recognizable in religious myths. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, God created the world through a series of speech acts. This allows human beings to seek to grasp his creation by reciting it. Failures to “recite” the Island of Sakhalin thus tended to give rise to semiotic perplexity. The “condition of silence” that made Doroshevich “awestruck” is in other words related to the particular premises of place making that turned Sakhalin Island into a unique location. If silence is close to the eternal, to death, sound in contrast suggests that something is animated. Since what already is established fails to capture the experience of exile on

Sakhalin, language, too, collapses. In a discussion of women exiles, Howard writes the following: “If from one of these unfortunate creatures you happened to hear a pleasant and cheerful word, it seemed to come through them, not from them, the expression of the face, like that of a ventriloquist, being rigidly at variance with the words uttered” (Howard 1902: 177). The familiar sounds strangely out-of-place.

In Siberian prisons another kind of silence reigned too. Doroshevich tells the story of how one prisoner on Sakhalin, Matvey, was approached by an Ivan. “‘Ivans’ are the evil, the bane, the scourge of our katorga—its despots, its tyrants.” (Doroshevich 2011: 184). The Ivan turned to Matvey. “The warden wants me for something at the chancery. But I’ve sold my cassock. Gimme your gov’ment issue to wear. Gimme it, y’hear? If the warden sees me without a cassock he’ll stick me in the ‘dryer’”. Matvey found himself in an impossible situation. The cassock was given up.

No one stood up for Matvey, whose last piece of property was taken and for which he’d have to answer with his back. No one stood up for him because: ‘You don’t talk back to Ivans!’... As they were telling me this story they introduced Matvey himself.

‘Well, how about that cassock, chap?!’

Matvey was silent.

‘Don’t be scared. The barin already knows everything. Nothing bad’ll happen to you!’ the prisoners urged him on. But Matvey maintained the same gloomy downcast silence.” (Doroshevich 2011: 197)

The literature of Siberian exile also includes examples of what, following Elaine Scarry (1985), we might call “the destruction of language”. These are the torture scenes (see, e.g., Doroshevich 2011: 28–29, 151, 180–182). In the following paragraph, from *The Island of Sakhalin*, Chekhov reports from an occasion when he was permitted to witness the flogging of a prisoner.

The executioner stands to one side and strikes in such a way that the lash falls across the body. After every five strokes he goes to the other side and the prisoner is permitted a half-minute rest. Prokhorov’s [the prisoner] hair is matted to his forehead, his neck is swollen. After the first five or ten strokes his body, covered by scars from previous beatings, turns blue and purple, and his skin bursts at each stroke.

Through the shrieks and cries *there can be heard the words*: ‘Your worship! Your worship! Mercy, your worship!’

And later, after twenty or thirty strokes, *he complains like a drunken man or like someone in delirium*:

‘Poor me, poor me, you are murdering me... Why are you punishing me?’

Then follows a peculiar stretching of the neck, the noise of vomiting. *Prokhorov says nothing; only shrieks and wheezes*. A whole eternity seems to have passed since the beginning of the punishment. The warden cries, ‘Forty-two! Forty-three!’ It is a long way to ninety. (Chekhov 1989: 208; emphasis added)

The torture here successively deprives the prisoner of his ability to speak—but also of his ability to keep silent. At first he begs for mercy. Next, while he continues to utter words, his speech does not make any sense: he is “like a drunken man.” Finally, he “says nothing; only shrieks and wheezes.” “To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans,” according to Scarry, “is to witness the destruction of language, but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself” (Scarry 1985: 6). Siberian exile writing illuminates both these extremes.

### Vernacular Sounds

“When I awoke in the morning,” writes Chekhov, “the very diversity of sounds reminded me where I was.”

Under my windows the convicts passed along the street to the measured clanging of their irons. Opposite the apartment, in the military barracks, musicians were learning the marches with which they would greet the Governor-General. The flute played passages from one song, the trombone from another, and the bassoon from still another, and the result was inconceivable cacophony. (Chekhov 1989: 16)

These strange and cacophonous sounds, like the haunting silences of nature, give rise to semiotic perplexity. “‘Nice’ cannot exit your mouth,” writes Doroshevich (2011: 12), “for you hear chains clinking from around the corner.” Sounds—what Doroshevich (2011: 27) calls a “repulsive vernacular”—of course do exist, but they are sounds that somehow silence language. Thereby a world does not appear—only particularities where everything, to repeat Botting’s phrasing, seem to demand equal attention.

Apart from the sounds from clinking chains and the clanging of irons, nature itself offers sounds that appear as a primordial language that somehow speaks in place of failed words. “From the very beginning of Dué,” writes Chekhov, “local life took on a form which can only be expressed by these inexorably brutal and hopeless sounds and the fiercely bitter wind blowing from the sea into the gap during the cold nights, which alone sings what it must” (Chekhov 1989: 74). We could interpret this as an example of a romantic mode of writing, in Murav’s sense. But I am more interested in its anthropological significance.

The anthropology of sounds tends to center precisely on the relationship between emotion and sonic form and structure and organization. Steve Feld has for example suggested that an ethnography should include what it is that people hear every day, what he

calls “acoustemology”: “one’s sonic way of knowing and being in the world” (Feld & Brennies 2004: 462). A central idea of an anthropology of sounds is “to have the sound raise the question about the indexicality of voice and place, to provoke you to hear *sound making as place making*.” Indeed, when we hear sounds, we “grasp something at a sensuous level that is considerably more abstract and difficult to convey in a written ethnography” (Feld & Brennies 2004: 45).

Even if Sakhalin appears as “the end of the world,” ominously suggesting meaninglessness, the sounds that do exist signify the island. We cannot resist finding meaning in the sounds that do surround us. Perhaps this is particularly true in cases when words fail us, and the sounds of nature appear to speak in their stead, reaching out to express something beyond words.

[...]

#### A Modern Mode of Worldmaking

As Leona Toker points out, “most literary texts, fictional as well as factographic, construct models of extratextual reality, making use of different combinations of the representative and the referential.” She specifies “replication,” “simulation,” and “formalization” as three different modes of such narrative representation. “*Replication* is an attempt to model the structure of the original by identifying its constituents; *simulation* consists in tracing the way things work, that is, the function of specific constituents; and *formalization* involves a competition with the original for philosophical or aesthetic coherence” (Toker 2000: 137–138).

My chapter has exemplified all these modes. I have discussed images of Sakhalin Island as “non-human” in terms of language (characterized by a “condition of silence”) and temporality (located in the past or even “outside of time”) in order to explore the existential or anthropological problems to which world-making is a necessary and, indeed, compulsory human response. I have also discussed instances when worldmaking seemed to fail, and how the “exilic mode of existence” instead brought forth a disquietingly dysfunctional “world apart.” A focus on “negative examples” in the texts, helps illuminate dynamic premises that are missing, but which arguably must exist for a world to flourish. Finally, some of the texts I have discussed, transcend particular circumstances, actual people, and real events—texts that speak instead of Siberian exile on a more general level, either to accumulate knowledge (science), or to create works of literature (art).

[...]

Myths and stories on exile often tell us that a banished person cannot continue to exist in the same way as before, but must re-create her sense of self and fashion a new world around her (see, e.g., Ingleheart 2011; Seidel 1986). This is a quality to be taken seriously: that exile invites, or even compels, particular kinds of intellectual thought and existential work. This is sometimes referred to as the paradox of exile: how “exile as manifestation of loss, suffering, and despair is also a concept which is creatively and intellectually stimulating” (Everett & Wagstaff 2004: xi). Exile thus tends to generate both perils and promises. The anthropologist Melinda Hinkson captures this paradoxical quality when she describes exile as a “contradictory experience of liberation and entrapment that generates, but ultimately withholds, new possible selves and lives” (Hinkson 2018: 521).

[...]

These texts documents, and others like them, are anthropological sources in three different respects: first, they document the exile system from within (social organization); second, they document native peoples (ethnography); and, third, they also thereby exemplify a significant moment in the history of an emergent cosmopolitan world-view. Because the observers came from different backgrounds, they used various vernaculars to animate what they observed; and they created representations that transcended the worlds they documented.

[...]

Since the exile narratives that I have discussed were based on firsthand experiences of Siberian exile and prison life, they seem to foreshadow the method of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation: that “peculiarly demanding combination,” as one anthropological textbook has it, “of physical hardship, psychological disorientation, and intellectual challenge” (Peacock 1986: x). A comparison between exile narratives and anthropology is illuminating also in another respect. The classical anthropological approach maintained that “there are as *many different worlds* upon the earth as there are languages” (Kluckhohn 1950: 149; emphasis added), and the discipline engaged mostly in what Arjun

Appadurai has characterized as “the production of locality” through vernacular modes of world-making (Appadurai 1996: 178–199). Yet the discipline also contributed, somewhat more indirectly or epiphenomenally, to the production of knowledge about the human on a more universal level. Since every situation exhibits features that transcend the context of their appearance, the proliferation and circulation of published ethnographies also helped actualize a perspective that locates all such localities within *a single world*. I call this cosmopolitan world-making.

Siberian exile narratives thus comprise a world literary corpus that, analogously to anthropology, transcends the vernacular worlds it represents. While the texts are first and foremost *about* a specific world, they are also written *for* the world—and are themselves *of* the world. Thus in addition to translating “knowing into telling” (White 1987: 1) through literary work, Siberian exile narratives also oscillate between modes of vernacular and cosmopolitan world-making. I have been able to investigate this dynamic by paying attention to what Edwards calls “the mutations of the written word as it moves into print” (Edwards 1994: 6); that is, the processes that followed as exile narratives became stabilized in print and began to circulate the globe and thereby received an independent existence as texts *in* the world.

More specifically, my inquiry into Siberian exile writing has followed Philip Edwards’s emphasis on “the movement from experience into the written word, and on the mutations of the written word as it moves into print”—i.e., the “link between the writer, the world and the work” (Edwards 1994: 6; cf. Manganaro 1990). I have found that many of the narratives I work with are decidedly modern in the sense that they are “premised on the emergence of advanced communication techniques and a global public sphere” (Osterhammel 2014: 138).<sup>24</sup> As such, they exemplify an emergent mode of cosmopolitan worldmaking that tended, often self-consciously, to transcend the vernacular worlds it represented. Many of the writers that I discuss sought for example to address an educated transnational audience. This is apparent in the politicized international debates, which began in the 1860s, of the pros and cons of the Siberian exile system, as well as in memoirs and works of literature that sought to bear witness from within Siberian penitentiaries. Many texts also explicitly actualize questions that would become central to modern anthropology as it emerged in the twentieth century. What are the limits of progressive thought? Is it

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<sup>24</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel has a few paragraphs that focus on modern aspects of exile and exile politics in the nineteenth century (2014: 133–139); cf. also Liebersohn (2006: 11–12).

possible to draw a line between the variable and the invariable in relation to human behavior? Do human universals exist? And what, ultimately, is *anthropos*?

In this context, it makes sense, finally, to reframe Siberia, often treated as the quintessential epitome of a remote place, as a “significant geography” (Laachir et al. 2018). This concept underlies that the world “is not a given but is produced by different, embodied, and located actors,” a perspective which resonates with my focus on worldmaking. Significant geography encompasses “the conceptual, imaginative, and real geographies that texts, authors, and language communities inhabit, produce, and reach, which typically extend outwards without (ever?) having a truly global reach” (Laachir et al. 2018: 294; cf. Gupta & Ferguson 1997). The concept thus allows us to view Siberian exile writing, understood as a modern mode of worldmaking, in a larger perspective of emergent cosmopolitan notions of the world as a single place.

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