

Abstract: While Anton Chekhov's influence on Katherine Mansfield is widely acknowledged, the two writers' settler colonial aesthetics have not been brought into systematic comparison. Yet Chekhov's chronicle of Sakhalin Island in the Russian Far East parallels in important ways Mansfield's near-contemporaneous account of colonial life in New Zealand. Both writers were concerned with a specific variant of the colonial situation: settler colonialism, which prioritises appropriation of land over the governance of peoples. This essay considers the aesthetic strategies each writer developed for capturing that milieu in their travel writings within the framework of the settler colonial aesthetics that has guided much anthropological engagement with endangered peoples.

Keywords: settler colonialism, ethnography, salvage anthropology, Sakhalin, New Zealand, Siberia, Maori, Gilyak, Russian colonialism, empire,

The Aesthetic Terrain of Settler Colonialism: Katherine Mansfield and Anton Chekhov's Natives

*Indigenous peoples' existing survival on the side of life
will then contradict the most fundamental characteristic
of what being 'indigenous' (in the eyes of the settler) is
all about: they will not go away.*

--Lorenzo Veracini, 'Introducing Settler Colonial Studies'

In 1907, a nineteen-year-old Katherine Mansfield embarked on a three-week journey through New Zealand's central North Island. Her destination was Te Urewera, a remote region in New Zealand, where she compiled the notes that were later to be reworked in her stories. It was to be her final journey through her home country. Mansfield left New Zealand the following year to study in England, and never returned home. The notebook Mansfield kept of that journey mixes travel notes and reportage with details about the New Zealand landscape and the Maori language. In this notebook, Mansfield pioneered a new 'technique of observation and reportage' (Gordon 1993, 20)¹, of a kind on display in the following description of a native woman, with orthography and excisions given as they appear in the original manuscript:

A young Maori girl—climbs slowly up the hill—she does not see me—I do not move—she reaches a little knoll—and suddenly sits down—native fashion—her legs crossed her under her hands clasped in her lap—She is dressed in a blue skirt & white soft blouse—Round her neck is a piece of twisted flax & a long piece of greenstone—is suspended from it—Her black hair is twisted softly at the neck—She wears long white & red bone earrings. She is very young—

¹ The title '*Urewera Notebook*' was bestowed on the text by Ian Gordon as Mansfield did not name her notebooks.

² This recent critical edition represents a significant advance in terms of philological and paleographic precision over Gordon's edition (Mansfield 1978).

³ Census data is available at http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm.

⁴ It is telling that one of the most important discussions of Chekhov's ethnography is by an anthropologist rather

~~she has~~ [*five illegible words deleted*]. She sits silent—utterly motionless—her head thrown back—All the lines of her face are passionate violent—crudely savage—but in her lifted eyes struggles a tragic, illimitable Peace –

The sky changes – softens—the lake is all grey mist—the island in heavy shadow—silence broods among the trees – ~~the birds are silent now.~~ —The girl does not move. But ahead far far away—very faint and ^sweet^ and beautiful—a star wakes in the sky—

She is the ^very^ incarnation of evening—and lo—the first star—shines in her eyes (Mansfield 2015, 107).²

The excisions and punctuation attest to the care with which Mansfield composed this literary sketch, as if it were a draft for a more polished work. As she generates broken syntax suffused with jarring images, Mansfield exoticises and humanises the Maori girl in the same representation. Viewed from afar, the native girl does not see the author; the distance between viewer and viewed opens up a space for closer observation. The girl is also memorialised as if in a prelude to her disappearance. Mansfield recognises the dignity and beauty of the girl even as she incorporates her into a landscape that is being deforested in order to clear a path for white settlers. The girl merges with the cosmos as ‘the first star—shines in her eyes.’ The destruction of the Maori way of life is made to appear imminent, terrifying, and sublime all at the same time in these words. Unable to stop this destruction, the writer turns it into an object of aesthetic reflexion.

Only a decade earlier, the Russian writer Anton Chekhov encountered a similar situation among the indigenous people of Sakhalin, an island in the North Pacific Ocean, just north of Japan and making the northeastern most edge of the Russian empire. Since the 1860s, Sakhalin had also become “Russia’s grimmest penal colony” (Rayfield). Convicts were sent here from central Russia after the authorities had dismissed the possibility of their rehabilitation. Although other Russian writers subsequently travelled to Sakhalin, and used the difficult conditions there to launch broader arguments against the Russian penal system, Chekhov was the first to pursue this line of critique. More importantly for present purposes, he was also the only writer of the time to include an ethnography of indigenous peoples,

² This recent critical edition represents a significant advance in terms of philological and paleographic precision over Gordon’s edition (Mansfield 1978).

particularly the Gilyak (also known as the Nivkh), in his discussion of Sakhalin as a penal colony. Other progressive writers, such as Vlas Doroshevich (1865-1922), who devoted themselves to the subject of Sakhalin (Doroshevich 2005 [1907]), used the example of this penal colony primarily to denounce the treatment of Russian prisoners, not to expose the process of settler colonialism that was gradually overtaking the region.

The Gilyak were facing annihilation as a result of Russification policies and the spread of the diseases introduced by Russian settlers. Images from the time reinforce the sense of their alterity (figures 1 and 2). Chekhov's account of the Gilyak gently normalises (while forecasting) their eventual extinction. 'The Gilyak,' he writes, 'belong neither to a Mongoloid nor to a Tungic stock, but rather to an unknown tribe that was once perhaps magnificent and which ruled over all of Asia but which is now living out its last era on a small patch of land as a not very numerous, yet still beautiful and brave, people' (Chekhov 2010, 130). As if prognosticating their eventual disappearance from the earth, Chekhov writes that 'as a result of their unusual friendliness and mobility, the Gilyak have mixed with all of their neighbours, making it impossible now to encounter a *pur sang* [pure-blooded] Gilyak, who is not in some way related to a Mongol, Tungic, or Ain people' (130).



Figure 1: *Sketch of a Gilyak Woman* (Labbe 1903: 216)

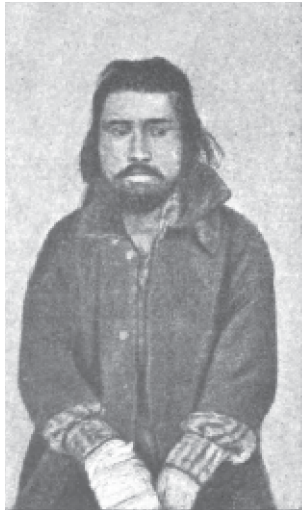


Figure 2: *Sketch of a Gilyak Man* (Labbe 1903: 207)

From Chekhov's perspective, the Gilyak's racial impurity made the prospect of their eventual extinction less tragic and more inevitable. Here and elsewhere, Chekhov participates in a tradition of salvage anthropology that 'constructed a canon of authenticity...to filter modern adaptations from culture in order to discover a supposedly 'authentic' culture that had existed in the past' and to treat distance from this constructed authenticity as a sign of impurity (Nurse 2011, 63). Figures 3 and 4 reflect this impression of the Gilyaks as representatives of a vanishing form of life. Because the Gilyak were seen to be on the brink of disappearance, they were perpetually in need of the explorer-anthropologist who could reconstruct their life ways for a colonial readership.



Figure 3: *A Gilyak Canoe* (Labbe 1903: 226)

Figure 4: *Gilyak girls fishing* (Labbe 1903: 215)



Figure 4: *Gilyak girls fishing* (Labbe 1903: 215)

Contrary to Chekhov's predictions, the Gilyak survived, albeit in small numbers. As of the 2010 Russian census, their combined population is now five thousand.³ They were the subject of an important Soviet ethnography by the Jewish anthropologist Lev Shternberg, which was eventually published by the American Museum of Natural History (see Shternberg 1933 and 1999). As Chekhov predicts the Gilyak's disappearance from the earth, he renders their life ways and culture with the same painstaking detail he lavished on his literary characters. In anecdote after anecdote, Chekhov dwells on the Gilyak's sense of humour and their aversion to lying. In his words, the Gilyak "lie only when they are trading or conversing with suspicious individuals or with those who are, in their opinion, dangerous" (134). Chekhov goes well beyond this type of ethnographic observation, however; for brief moments in his prose, he enters fully into the life worlds of this indigenous people in ways no writer prior to him had done.

One example is a scene that follows immediately after an extended ethnographic exegesis of the Gilyak, in which Chekhov becomes a character in his own narrative. Chekhov recounts being asked about his profession by a group of inquisitive Gilyaks. When he told them that he was a writer [*pisar'*], he is asked about his salary. Chekhov informs the Gilyaks that he earned three thousand roubles a month. His interlocutors' response was unforgettable. "One had to see what an unpleasant, even sickness-inducing, impression my answer made on them," Chekhov recounts, in order to believe it (134). The Gilyak interlocutors writhe on the

³ Census data is available at http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm.

ground from pain, while their faces radiate despair. What caused this extreme reaction? Ever the skilful storyteller, Chekhov does not say directly. Instead, he lets his characters tell the story. “Why did you say such a thing?” the Gilyak asks concerning his salary, and cites a much lower figure received by a resident of Sakhalin. Chekhov then introduces his interlocutors to the principles of the market economy, and explains why such a salary is necessary for a traveller like him. The initial reaction of the Gilyak to the high figure implies that, somewhat comically, they regards Chekhov’s initial figure as sacrilegious and offensive. Yet Chekhov managed to convert his interlocutors to his way of seeing, so that his seemingly high level of compensation no longer caused offense. This incident is illuminating not only for its content, but for the form through which it is rendered, like a dialogue in a Chekhovian short story, wherein neither speaker wholly understands the dynamics of the exchange.

Distinctively, yet drawing on cognate discourses, Mansfield and Chekhov contributed to merger of a new genre of salvage ethnography with an older tradition of travel writing (Chekhov in fact subtitled his book ‘Travel Notes’). As a genre, salvage ethnography reconstructs on paper an indigenous way of life in anticipation of its disappearance from the world. The modes of affective representation specific to this type of engagement range from lament to eulogy to nostalgia; they share in common a perception of the subject of representation as under threat of extinction, and a commitment to extracting aesthetic benefits from the process of annihilation. The aims and methods deployed by texts within this genre that gives verbal shape to vanishing forms of life too diverse to collapse into a single framework, but certain themes and techniques can be identified. They relate to, but do not wholly encompass, the aesthetic techniques of the colonial and postcolonial literary traditions that have dominated this field. Critically, salvage ethnography is foundational to an imperial practice that holds, as one settler colonial commentator wrote in 1838, ‘the wiser course

would be, to let the native race gradually retire before the settlers, and ultimately become extinct' ('Colonisation in South Australia and New Zealand' 1838, 258).

Ethnographic travel writing often articulates a settler colonial take on racial difference by juxtaposing the settlers to the indigenous population, sometimes elevating the latter, and on other occasions by denigrating them. Briefly, the settler colonial take can be defined as one that relates to the original inhabitants as objects destined for extinction and which naturalises the coloniser's relationship to the territory being colonised, even while (sometimes) lamenting the process through which this colonisation takes place. Colonialism in the classical sense is interested in governance of an often unruly or resistant populace; settler colonialism, by contrast, aims not at governing this population, but at effecting its annihilation, at least to the extent that the new territorial claims can be naturalised. Settler colonialism justifies itself in terms of claims to land rather than through civilizational hierarchies, as is the case with colonialism in its classical iteration. Mansfield's and Chekhov's engagements with and subversions of existing settler colonial discourses are the two points along the settler colonial discursive continuum with which this essay is concerned. I engage here with these two authors' works with the aim of better understanding the relation between aesthetics and the political project of settler colonialism, and in order to understand how aesthetic perception can inform and transform a structure of domination into a space for critique.

Chekhov studies tends to situate this author within a European literary canon, and only a few have engaged with him from a postcolonial perspective (Lantz 2013 and Dutt 2013), or attended to Chekhov's critique of empire (Grant 1997 and Beer 2016). By contrast, Mansfield scholars have recently begun to explore how her fiction and travel writings engage the borderlands of empire in monographs, edited collections, and special journal issues (most notably Wilson, Kimber, and Correa 2013). Yet long before the postcolonial turn within

Mansfield studies, indigenous writers engaged with Mansfield's representation of the dynamics of the settler colonial situation. Most famously, the New Zealand indigenous writer Witi Ihimaera (b. 1944) staged a dialogue with Mansfield in his collection *Dear Miss Mansfield* (1989). Scholars such as Janet Wilson, Mark Williams, Bridget Orr, Ian Gordon, Elleke Boehmer, and Saikat Majumdar have subsequently in different ways considered how Mansfield critically reframed literary modernism by infusing this metropolitan literary movement with colonial themes and experience (Wilson 2013; Williams 2000; Gordon 1993; Orr 1995; Boehmer 2011; Majumdar 2013, 71-99). Moving beyond the still dominant Anglo-American scholarly construction of a writer 'with little or no relationship to her colonial roots' (Majumdar 2013, 77), the present essay engages with the ongoing postcolonial re-reading of Mansfield by inquiring into how her representation of New Zealand's native inhabitants illuminates the settler colonial condition, including its aesthetic forms. I pursue this goal by comparing Mansfield's *Urewera Notebook* and the ethnographic narrative of Sakhalin by her Russian predecessor in the art of the short story, Anton Chekhov.

Like Mansfield but to an arguably greater extent, Chekhov has been situated almost exclusively within the European literary tradition. While Chekhov's own literary influences provide a basis for treating him as a European writer, the ethnographic engagement with Sakhalin that consumed a large portion of his brief life enable us to read his texts in a more broadly global transimperial context.⁴ Chekhov's ethnography also enables us to engage with Russophone literature as a literature of empire, and to take account of how the non-Russian subjects of Russian literary representation might have had a more critical take on the imperial project than even Chekhov could articulate.⁵

⁴ It is telling that one of the most important discussions of Chekhov's ethnography is by an anthropologist rather than a connoisseur of the European canon. See Narayan (2012).

⁵ The field of Russophone postcolonial and anticolonial studies is in its extreme infancy. There is more work on the Soviet and post-Soviet period, such as Uffelmann and Smola's *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures After Communism* (2016). For anticolonial literature in the early years of the Soviet Union, see Gould (2016).

Critics of postcolonial studies have long taken the field to task for homogenising different modalities of colonialism under a single heading. It has been argued that the diverse ways in which colonial rule has been experienced across the globe cannot be theorised within the framework of a single unit of analysis. In the minds of these critics, postcolonial theory fails to cohere as a method of inquiry (see Ahmad 1992). The logics that underwrite each and every colonial situation, so this argument runs, are too disaggregated, and too distinct, to generate universalisable results. Yet a case can also be made for a more comprehensive and systematic analysis attuned to the aesthetic logic of the colony as political form. As Maxime Rodinson argued back in 1968 in his analysis of Israel as a settler colony, while ‘there is no such thing as colonialism and imperialism’ in the singular, “there is a series of social phenomena in which numerous analogies with one another can be found, but also infinite nuances, and which have come to be referred to with labels’ (36).⁶

Alongside the argument against generalising the colonial condition, there has also been an effort to disambiguate postcoloniality geographically. The advent of settler colonial studies, which can be dated to 1999 with the publication of Patrick Wolfe’s seminal study, *Settler Colonialism*, offers an important alternative to a postcolonial studies that homogenises historical, cultural, and geographic difference, as well as a paradigm for studying colonialism that diverges from the model of exogenous domination from afar (Wolfe 1999). While Wolfe offers a variation on colonial domination through his analysis of settler colonialism, more recently, pioneering voices within this emergent field insist that ‘colonialism is not settler colonialism’ because ‘colonisers and settler colonisers want essentially different things’ (Veracini 2011a, 1). The texts under discussion here suggest that, while the postcolonial paradigm is premised on a model of colonial rule that fits the colonisation of India and much of Africa, whereby a colonial regime is eventually superseded by a postcolonial elite, it is the

⁶ The French title, *Israel, fait colonial*, does not make the link with settler colonialism as explicit as does the English translation; nonetheless, even without being named, this paradigm is implicit within Rodinson’s argument.

anticolonial, rather than the postcolonial model, that is best suited to describing the aftermath of settler colonialism. At the same time, it is important to remember that settler colonies, and settler colonial literature, continue to maintain close contact with a colonial audience and readership. This is relevant for the study of settler colonial literature insofar as it means that, even if the settler colonial aesthetics diverge from the aesthetics of conventionally colonial representation, the audiences for the two forms of representation are often the same. Chekhov's audience was comprised of readers across the Russian empire, who would have related to the Gilyaks not as a people they hoped to replace, but rather as an exotic tribe awaiting a presumably divinely-ordained extinction. The colonial encounter would have looked quite different from the vantage point of the Russian convicts who were residing on the island alongside the indigenous population. As with Chekhov, so with Mansfield: as an aspirationally global writer, she was writing for an imperial audience, spanning the British empire. Among the last dimensions of settler colonial culture to be canonised and codified is literature.

According to Wolfe (2006), '[t]erritoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element,' that sets it apart from other forms of violent racially divided governance (388).⁷ Wolfe defines settler colonialism as 'an inclusive, land-centred project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies, from the metropolitan centre to the frontier encampment, with a view to eliminating Indigenous societies' (393). Veracini (2011a) elaborates on Wolfe's pioneering work in the introductory essay to the inaugural issue of *Settler Colonial Studies*, which argues that 'colonialism and settler colonialism should be understood in their dialectical relation' rather than as variations on each other or subordinate

⁷ Another useful definition of settler colonialism is offered by the editors of *Settler Colonial Studies*, who note that 'settler colonialism is not colonialism: settlers want Indigenous people to vanish... Sometimes settler colonial forms operate within colonial ones, sometimes they subvert them, sometimes they replace them. But even if colonialism and settler colonialism interpenetrate and overlap, they remain separate as they co-define each other' (Cavanagh and Veracini 2013, 1). 'Settler colonialism' has as yet no entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

categories within a broader continuum (1). Veracini further makes the provocative point that the colonial encounter is mirrored by a settler colonial ‘non-encounter’ that is ‘premised on a foundational disavowal’ of the indigenous other’ (2011b, 5).

Amid their provocative analysis of social processes, these social scientists leave relatively unexplored the aesthetic dimensions of the settler colonial encounter. Just as the colonial encounter has its own specific forms of representation, and a repertoire of genres and discourses specific to its logic of power that has preoccupied postcolonial studies, so too is the settler colonial encounter characterised by a recognizable aesthetics, that remains undertheorised and underexplored (see Glissant 1997). This essay is a preliminary effort towards identifying those aspects of settler colonial aesthetics that resist, complicate, and hinder settler colonial dominance. Such literary excavations will demonstrate that, while few canonical modernist texts entirely refrain from propagating settler colonial discourses when they engage with indigenous populations, settler colonial aesthetics can also accommodate critiques and subversions of the political projects within which it is enmeshed.

Where do Mansfield and her New Zealand subjects fit into the postcolonial turn? What does Chekhov’s rendering of Sakhalin have to do with the critique of empire? Although Mansfield’s stories are increasingly recognised as belonging to a postcolonial canon, her specific take on the settler colonial condition remains at the margins of her reception. A first effort by Aretoulakis (2013) has highlighted some key aspects of Mansfield’s treatment of the colonial situation: her interest in liminal situations, her cultivation of ‘third spaces’ that resist dichotomies of colonizer/colonized, and her interest in death scenes as a means of challenging the hegemonic logic of colonial power. In this last respect in particular Mansfield joins with Chekhov: latent parallels in their oeuvres between both the personal extinction both writers faced as they battled tuberculosis, and the species extinction which the settler colonial condition forced them to contemplate, place imperial politics into close relation with

the experience of mortality. Chekhov embarked on the treacherous eleven-week journey to Sakhalin in full knowledge that it would hasten his own death. Although it was composed under a less intense form of duress, Mansfield's depiction of the indigenous peoples of Te Urewera and throughout her fiction is shot through with the shadow of mortality. Affectively, this experience takes the form of jarring brevity. As they resigned themselves to their own extinction, both writers also developed new ways of understanding the gradual annihilation of colonized peoples.

Like New Zealand, Sakhalin is located on the edge of a vast imperial geography. A comparison between Mansfield's treatment of the indigenous New Zealand peoples whom she encountered shortly before sailing to England in 1908, never to return home, and Chekhov's account of Sakhalin, a penal colony located so deep in the Russian Far East that Chekhov was to describe it as 'the end of the earth [*konets sveta*]', (Chekhov 1978, 45) is therefore long overdue. As they probe the frontiers of imperial configurations, both authors offer new ways of understanding the place of settler colonialism, within, and in contrast to, the colonial condition.

There are many reasons to bring these two bodies of work into comparison. Arguably the most persuasive is Mansfield's selection of Chekhov as her master in the short story genre. Although scholars have tried to map a precise genealogy of Chekhov's influence on her work, according to Mansfield herself, Chekhov's most profound influence was less over her writerly craft than on her way of life. Mansfield debt to Chekhov as a role model for living is evident in a comparison she made of his empathetic gifts with those of Dostoevsky. Once when immersed in her own tribulations and struggles, Mansfield (1951) wrote: 'Chekhov would understand: Dostoevsky wouldn't. Because he's never been in the same situation. He's been poor and ill and worried but, *enfin*, the wife has been there to sell her

petticoat, or there has been a neighbour. He wouldn't be alone. But Tchekov has known just exactly this that I know. I discover it in his work often' (293).

Chekhov was a model to Mansfield in more than the realm of art. Like her, he died young, and of the very same disease: tuberculosis. Although his art did not dwell on illness, Chekhov's experience with tuberculosis clearly shaped his writing trajectory, as it did Mansfield's. Chekhov was more to Mansfield than a masterful writer; he was a kindred spirit, to whom she appealed when overwhelmed by the pain and fear of dying alone. A note dated 5 July 1918 from Mansfield's *Journal* (1946) reads: 'Tchekov! why are you dead? Why can't I talk to you, in a big darkish room, at late evening...I'd like to write a series of Heavens: that would be one' (93). The comparison of Mansfield and Chekhov's aesthetics therefore also involves the study of a way of living, a way of dying, insofar as these relate to a way of conceptualizing the settler colonial encounter. Such an inquiry would consider how two creative artists who died from tuberculosis at the ages of thirty-five and forty-four, respectively, negotiated the relation between art and life as they confronted their imminent deaths, and in how their mortality affected their artistic praxis.

While there are obvious historical and aesthetic parallels between Mansfield and Chekhov's writings on settler colonialism, there are equally salient differences. First and foremost, one must consider questions of audience. Whereas Chekhov worked on his Sakhalin book for many years, Mansfield's sketches of indigenous New Zealand are concentrated into a single notebook that was not intended for publication, although she drew on it extensively as a source for her stories. Whereas Mansfield admired the pure artistry of Chekhov's short stories, in his Sakhalin book, Chekhov moved beyond fiction and aimed to directly influence political life. In contrast to Chekhov's published book on Sakhalin and the Russian penal system, Mansfield had no agenda to advance other than the cultivation of her artistic gifts. Her reflections on settler colonialism had no preexisting audience. By contrast,

in his nonfictional writings on Sakhalin, Chekhov sought to create among his readers and within the Russian body politic a space for the reform of the Russian penal system. Like other writers of his time, Chekhov was less troubled by the colonization of the Gilyak than he was of the impact of the penal system on the Russian convicts of in Sakhalin, who were forced ‘to drag themselves in chains across tens of thousands of kilometers in freezing conditions, infected...with syphilis, and debauched’ (Chekhov 2004, letter to Suvorin, 204-205). Like many writers of the time, Chekhov’s social conscience was more heavily exercised by the persecution of Russians than the extermination of the Gilyak. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, whereas the Gilyak were rapidly approaching extinction in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Maori were not so close to the brink of extinction.

Mansfield did not read Chekhov’s book on Sakhalin. One of Chekhov’s most neglected works, the first translation of *Sakhalin* appeared in German eight years after Mansfield’s death (Chekhov 1931). Perhaps due to its Asian setting, *Sakhalin* was next translated into Japanese and subsequently Chinese and Korean. The first French translation appeared only in the twenty-first century, and the first translation of the text into English appeared in 1967 (Chekhov 1967). In short, given Mansfield’s lack of access to Russian, it is a certainty that she never read Chekhov’s account of his voyage to the Far Eastern island. The comparison assayed here is thus one of confluence rather than influence.

Notwithstanding the lack of direct influence, the resemblances between Chekhov’s and Mansfield’s depictions of the colonial situation are striking. While critical of settler colonialism insofar as it was premised on the extermination of the native population, and keeping their distance from the colonial class to which they belonged, both writers avoided polemics in their aesthetic production. Their reticence did not stem from apathy or indifference to the consequences of settler colonialism. Rather, both writers were instinctively persuaded of the inability of mere political condemnation to intervene in, or to

halt, the processes they were witnessing. Reading their settler colonial aesthetics as a means of coming to terms, both with their own mortality and with the mortality of the indigenous peoples they were describing, can offer a insight into the means through which art, sometimes silently but always perceptively, bears witness to political catastrophe.

Colonisation as Destiny

Chekhov's ethnography of the Gilyak internalises key tenets of the settler colonial enterprise while also seeking to reform them in more liberal directions. In Chekhov's salvage anthropology, the vulnerability of the ethnographic group in question to extinction is assumed (Veracini 2011a, 4). Specific features of their culture and way of life are recorded in writing to provide what Chekhov calls 'indications that will be useful in practice for new colonisers [*novichkov-kolonistov*] (2010, 131).' As these words suggest, Chekhov's representations of the Gilyak are fraught with ambivalence. Whereas Mansfield's representations of the Maori are suffused with a suppressed fear of the fate that awaited them, Chekhov's representations by contrast evoke nostalgia. They are not the 'fiercest words...against the / colonial violence of the convict settlers,' that the American poet Ed Sanders claimed them to be in his rhapsody to the Russian writer (Sanders 1995, 129-130).

Far from producing a polemic against colonisation, Chekhov produced a text that made colonisation palatable, and that in particular assisted doctors 'in learning the conditions under which our [Russian] interference in the life of the [Gilyak] people could bring them the least harm' (2010, 133). Whether such a work is read as an apology for empire, or as an attempt to moderate its negative effects, it would be a mistake to position it entirely in opposition to the settler colonial process. Chekhov's work is situated at the juncture where salvage ethnography compensates for the loss of a way of life with science and anthropology. As the natives perish, their memory lingers. Literature, along with other forms of artistic expression, is instrumental to this memorialisation.

Chekhov assumed the inevitability of colonialization. The Gilyak, in his view, were destined for annihilation. ‘It is not within medicine’s power to arrest fatal extinction,’ he wrote bleakly (2010, 133). Yet he did seek to improve on existing forms of colonisation. Hence, Chekhov cautiously objected to a general’s plan to Russify the Sakhalin Gilyaks, noting ‘I do not see why this should be necessary.’ Chekhov concluded his chapter on the Gilyak (having opened it with the probing question, ‘Was their colonization done in freedom?’) by suggesting mildly, ‘if Russification is inevitable...it should be done by taking *their* needs, rather than ours, into consideration’ (2010, 137). With these words, Chekhov evinces an anticolonial aesthetic, and a counter-imperial politics, in the making. He also demonstrates awareness that the best interests of the native population do not necessarily coincide with the best interests of the colonising power. Yet the precise fault lines of these divergences remain unarticulated within Chekhov’s work.

Chekhov goes on to praise recent governmental policies that allowed the Gilyak to receive treatment at the local hospital, to receive food rations, and to protect their possessions from confiscation and to have their debts forgiven. He advocates in short for a humane colonialism, not for the abolition of the settler colonial project itself, except insofar as this might be an unintended outcome of his real object of critique: the Russian penal system. It might be said in Chekhov’s defence that he was seeking to achieve the best possible outcome for the Gilyak against difficult odds, and under the aegis of a government that would not reverse its imperial ambitions, or allow freedom of the press to generate a meaningful anti-imperial critique. A call to cease colonising Siberia would have had little traction within Russian society of the time. Read within the context of the colonial discourse that dominated Chekhov’s intellectual milieu, wherein entire ethnic groups (especially in the Caucasus) were regularly and systematically expelled from their homelands, Chekhov’s account of the

decimation of the Gilyak by the colonising process reads like a progressive, if state-centric and ultimately pro-colonial, intervention.⁸

Couched in terms of progressive liberalism, Chekhov's attitude epitomises key aspects of the settler colonial project, from Russia to Australia to the Americas. Within settler colonialism, as Patrick Wolfe clarifies, '[t]he primary object... is the land itself rather than the surplus value to be derived from mixing native labour with it' (1999, 163). Colonialism as practiced in South Asia and throughout much of Africa involved governing a non-contiguous region from afar and with the assistance of natives who were willing to implement colonial law and to keep colonial institutions afloat. It aimed at the *extraction* of labour and resources rather than at occupation and extinction. By contrast, settler colonialism, which was arguably the primary model of colonisation through which the Russian empire expanded and through which New Zealand and Australia came into being as modern states, does not require the natives in order to administer its laws. It instead prefers their (gradual) annihilation.

Every paradigm must be viewed in light of the specific cases it proposes to explain. In the case of Russia, the Russian empire does not fully conform to the classical settler colonial paradigm set forth by Wolfe and Veracini, inasmuch as it borrowed many strategies from the traditional colonial repertoire and many types of colonialism co-existed under its aegis.⁹ Equally, the substantial differences between modes of exercising sovereignty over the indigenous population in the case of New Zealand, which had Maori members of parliament in the early twentieth century (Bargh 2010), and Australia, which did not grant citizenship to aboriginal peoples or include this population within its census until the late 1960s, merits a thoroughgoing effort at disambiguation beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

⁸ For the expulsion of ethnic groups from their homelands, see Richmond's (2013) account of the colonisation.

⁹ Many scholars, including Bassin 1999, Crews 2006, Morrison 2008, and Sunderland 2016, have weighed in on the issue of the paradigm to which the Russian empire corresponds, although none to my knowledge have specifically engage with Wolfe's or Veracini's understanding of settler colonialism. Non-engagement with the settler colonial paradigm also applies to the new generation of scholarship surveyed in Morrison 2016, even when this new scholarship deals extensively with non-Russian sources and perspectives.

Annihilation of the native population, whether through disease, genocide, or a combination of both, is the endpoint of the settler colonial process. Ethnography undertaken from this point of view memorializes in an effort to preserve, as if in a museum, the life ways of a people threatened by extinction. The Gilyaks' Russification meant their eventual extermination, albeit at a pace that could enable the process to appear like a gentle act of salvation rather than outright genocide. While figuring his approach to colonialism as that of the well-intentioned doctor, Chekhov also eulogised the slow violence of the settler colonial enterprise. Mansfield inherited Chekhov's ambivalence to colonialism, while depicting its violence with a greater intensity of cognitive dissonance. Like her predecessor, however, she could not oppose it wholeheartedly, in a polemical mode. Both writers were torn between their perception of the superiority of European culture (not least with regard to health and hygiene) and their empirical observation of the brutality of the colonising process.

The Colonial Subconscious

As with Chekhov's book on Sakhalin, Mansfield used her trip to assemble material for later writing projects. Although she never envisioned its publication, Mansfield took the notebook with her when she moved to London, and quoted from it in subsequent years when seeking inspiration for new stories. In labelling Sakhalin the place where Asia ends, Chekhov initiated what anthropologist Bruce Grant calls 'a tradition of prosaic exaggeration about the island's isolation,' that failed to acknowledge its proximity to major Russian cities, such as Vladivostok (a city with a population of 28,896 in 1897, according to the Russian Imperial Census) (1999, xxx).¹⁰ Much as Sakhalin marked the end of the known world for Chekhov, the more proximate and accessible Te Urewera signified for Mansfield a space alien to the Anglophone imagination. In the words of Mansfield's biographer, Claire Tomalin, New

¹⁰ Russian Imperial Census figures are found in *Pervaia Vseobshhaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897 g. Tablitsa XIII. Raspredelenie naseleniia po rodnomu iazyku* [The First General Census of the Russian Empire of 1897. Table XIII. Breakdown of population by mother tongue]. Volumes 1-50. Saint-Petersburg: 1903-1905; available online at http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_lan_97_uezd_eng.php.

Zealand was ‘the very last place, the furthest you could go, the end of the line’ (1988, 8).

What Sakhalin was to Siberia, New Zealand was to Australia: a colonial ‘margin of empire in the most extreme sense’ of the term (Majumdar 2013, 75).

And yet Mansfield negotiated this imperial margin in ways quite different from Chekhov. Whereas Chekhov drew on his medical training, statistics, and prior ethnography to evoke the world of the Gilyak, Mansfield’s cinematographic rendering of Te Urewera juxtaposes images and impressions without attempting a synthesis. The scenes she encountered in her three-week journey and evoked in her notebook were to inspire some of Mansfield’s most haunting short stories. Whereas Chekhov scientifically objectified the people he encountered in Sakhalin, Mansfield emotionally internalised the indigenous New Zealanders she encountered on her journey.

Midway through her journey Mansfield records a dream that awakens her in the middle of the night: ‘Round us in the dark-ness the horses were moving softly—with a most eerie sound—visions of long dead Maoris—of forgotten battles and vanished feuds—stirred in me’ (Mansfield 2015, 89). Mansfield then encounters ‘a little Maori whare [carved meeting house—RG]... painted black against the wide sky. Before ~~her~~ it—two cabbage trees stretched out phantom fingers—and a dog, watching me coming up the hill, barked madly— Then I saw the first star—very sweet & faint—in the yellow sky—and then another & another—like holes.’ The slippage between animacy and inanimacy (for example, “~~her~~ it”) suggests in this context the author’s apprehension that the objects in her natural surroundings will suddenly spring to life and call her to account for the destruction underway. Similarly, the phantom fingers and the barking dog seem to indicate a premonition of guilt, or at least of impending disaster.

Another later passage describes the scene of the massacre of Opipi (1869), where nine New Zealand soldiers were killed by Maoris fighting for Te Kooti. Many sections of

Mansfield's notebook entries are written like prose poems, and hence must be absorbed as single units, with all their orthographic irregularities in tact:

We wake early—and wash and dress—& go down to the bath again—Honeysuckle—roses pink and white—periwinkles syringas—red hot pokers—those yellow flowers—the ground is smothered—Fruit trees with promise of harvest—the hot lakes & pools—even—the homely clothes prop in the lush grass--& more mimosa—the birds are magical—I feel I cannot leave but pluck the honeysuckle & the splashes of light lie in the pine wood—Then good bye Taupo and here are more plains I feel quite at home again--& at last we come to Opipi—the scene of a most horrible massacre—only 2 men were saved—one rushed through the bush—one was cutting wood—we stop to look for water and there are two men—one [*illegible*] one most perfect Maori—like bronze the new pink shirt printed images—his horrible licensed walk his cigarette—Then we are in a valley of broom—such color—it is strewn everywhere (Mansfield 2015, 108).

The expository style of this passage speaks volumes for how these events are processed in the minds of the settlers, of whom the author is one. As throughout the notebook, Mansfield does not use periods, commas, or other conventional punctuation marks. Instead, she relies almost entirely on dashes to convey the flow of the syntax. Her images are cinematic in their impact. They do not aim at acclimating the reader to the environment but seek rather a shock effect. The use of tense is also noteworthy; all events in Mansfield's notebook are narrated in the present tense. When the Maori man emerges on the scene, the reader cannot but link him to the fighters for Te Kooti who defeated the New Zealand soldiers a few decades earlier.

As Mansfield's editor Anna Plumridge has noted, Mansfield later used the scene at Opipi in her poem 'In the Rangitaiki Valley' (1909) (see Mansfield 2016: 50-1, 155, and Mansfield 2015, 108 note to line 664). The following notebook entry evokes the scene that was to provide the setting for a story composed many years later, 'The Woman at the Store' (1912), which is remembered for its surreptitious depiction of colonial violence. This passage too must be absorbed in full, in order to grasp its lineage within the surreal yet nonetheless persuasive logic emerging from the description of the massacre:

I have never dreamed of such vivid blossom—Then lunch at Rangiteiki, the store is so ugly—they do not seem glad or surprised to see us—give us fresh bread, all seems so familiar, and they seem [*?troubled*]—And afar the plain—We say goodbye to [*illegible*]—and at night fall rounding the road, reach our copse. It is a threatening evening—the farm child—the woman her great boots—she has been digging—How glad she is to see us—her garrulous ways and the children's thoughtful fascination Then at night among the tussocks Then the pumice hills—river—and rain pours—(Mansfield 2015, 109).

The ‘blossom’ referred to is taken from Mansfield’s dream in the prior notebook entry. Yet the scene rapidly shifts to a daylight hour, dominated by lunch at Rangiteiki. The contrast between the sublimity of the natural environment and the dilapidated signs of settler life is striking. Everyone’s countenance is shot through either with fear or exhaustion. The slippages in the above passages between the terror of the night and the surreal impossibility of the day, and between a hostile nature and a nature that beckons and enfolds, could only be captured through Mansfield’s disjointed parataxis. As Majumdar notes, Mansfield’s ‘awareness of a traumatic colonial history rooted in the same landscape that served as the setting of the story clearly influenced her depiction of what is one of the bleakest, bitterest, and darkest ambiances in her work’ (2013, 94). The juxtaposition of the Opipi massacre with the vertiginous tableau of the Rangiteiki Valley reveals ‘ravaged indigenous landscapes and histories get metonymically transformed in Mansfield’s imagination’ as ‘violence, bitterness, and trauma...[are] divested of their mooring in indigenous history’ (2013, 94). Mansfield goes a step further than Chekhov in aesthetically disentangling the settler colonial project and in acknowledging the injustices it perpetuated, but even her surrealism participates in the discourse of salvage anthropology that was coeval with settler colonialism’s political agenda.

In this essay, I have argued against the nascent tendency, evident within some strands of Anglophone postcolonial studies, to neatly enfold colonial-era modernist writers within an anticolonial project, as if their aims and agendas were entirely convergent. Such a seamless merger of these varying intellectual agendas works against an accurate assessment of their work, and ignores the radical disjuncture between the readership of Chekhov and Mansfield on the one hand and of anticolonial and postcolonial literature on the other. Only when the natives begin to read the author who memorialised their violent colonisation can settler colonialism itself be effectively critiqued. What is needed is not just an opposition to colonial violence, but a new way of understanding the imbrication of colonial aesthetics within

colonial politics. Theoretical engagements with the settler colonial paradigm can help us access these ways of seeing, but without indigenous voices, our angles of vision will always be incomplete.

Notwithstanding their liberal ambivalence to the state-sanctioned destruction of native peoples, both Chekhov and Mansfield contributed to the very discourse that normalised these atrocities. At the same time, these writers were not mere servants of empire. They infused into their complicit texts counter discourses that undid much, if not all, of settler colonial logic. With regard to Chekhov's book on Sakhalin, Cathy Popkin argues that it 'begins by fixing the longitudinal coordinates ends with an extreme sense of dislocation' (1992, 38). By deploying discontinuous narrative, irony, and cinematographic representation, rather than outright denunciation within their literary texts, both Chekhov and Mansfield cast doubt on the integrity of the colonial mission, and reminded their readers of what many of them may have wished to forget: that their own prosperity was directly enabled by other peoples' suffering.

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