"And So Dies My Clan": Reading Indigenous Literature and Politics Through Trauma Time

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Reading about violence is never easy. Thick descriptions of war, rape, genocide, forced displacement and other horrors of the human experience are emotionally taxing for the reader, to say nothing of what such episodes are like for survivors and witnesses who are able to write about what they have endured. The challenge of reading about atrocities and trauma is further problematized by the fact that the reader encounters events which have not occurred in a linear fashion and thus are never fully understood or explained from a singular perspective.

“There is no place left for us on this earth. No place to live, to breathe, to feel joy and sorrow.” (Aipin, 54); so begins Yeremei Aipin’s “And So Dies My Clan,” a traumatic narrative of the Khanty people’s encounter with Russian settler-colonialism in Western Siberia during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Published in Vaschenko and Smith’s 2010 volume The Way of Kinship, Aipin's essay offers the reader an account of the narrator’s reflection on the destruction of his Khanty community’s identity and territory at the hands of Soviet and Russian politicians and their oil industry allies. The narrator recounts traumatic stories of property theft, economic disenfranchisement, and untimely death, which are combined with the appropriation and spoiling of sacred, traditional territory and the forced elimination of Khanty cultural practices, in order to
highlight the sustained violence directed at the indigenous people of Western Siberia. The intermingling of personal anecdotes with those of his father’s and other community members, the narrator’s tale easily connects readers to contemporary political events, such as the violation of human rights, and social justice concerns for Khanty and other indigenous people in the region.

Aipin himself is an indigenous Khanty and is both a writer and local member of government, whose career has straddled the worlds of writing and politics (Vaschenko and Smith, 3-4). Aipin has also been involved in pro-Khanty activism in Russia as a member of the local Association of Indigenous Peoples, campaigning against the appropriation of Khanty territory and resources at the hands of state-backed oil and gas interests (“Russia: Oil companies inching closer to Khanty sacred sites”). As with much of indigenous writing which traverses Western constructs of nonfictional and fictional prose, Aipin’s essay invites the reader to seek out examples of where themes and events in the story arc also manifest themselves in the material world.

My own reading of Aipin’s story suggests two themes. First, the narrative form highlights the ways in which settler-state actors traumatically disrupt the traditionally-experienced seasons, cultural rhythms, and lived-time of the Khanty people, specifically through violent encounters, the expropriation of land and cultural practices, and the loss of Khanty personhood and sovereignty. Second, and perhaps as a corollary, my interpretation of “And So Dies My Clan” suggests that events narrated in the text subtly asks the reader to explore the contemporary politics of indigenous Khanty in Western Siberia, where settler-colonialism continues to take place at the hands of the Russian state and their petroleum-industry client corporations. These readings are not without their shortcomings, the least of which lies around questions of location and interpretation of the genre of indigenous literature itself.
Traumatic Encounters

Almost from the first, the reader is confronted with a range of traumatic encounters between indigenous people and settler-colonial actors. “One grasped the old man from behind, while the other removed his native fur boots --his kisi. They then leisurely returned to their truck and drove away” (54). The narrator’s father, pulling his sledge full of reindeer meat homeward, is stopped one January evening by men in a truck and is robbed by outsiders from the community. The trauma occurs not only in the disruption of a normally-experienced life, a man on his way home to feed his family, but also in the violence, “grasped the old man from behind” as well as the intentional appropriation of his kisi, representing both a valuable commodity in the cold winter of Western Siberia and also as a denigration of the culturally-significant, indigenous footwear. The narrator’s comments that, “Perhaps he (the father) understood it for the first time that evening in January when, on an empty winter road, he was suddenly blocked by a truck that had stopped ahead of him” further locates the father’s lived experience in a traumatic context as, “From that day on, he began to mark the passage of time differently’ (54).

Traumatic occurrences engulf normal or regularized patterns of a person’s lived experience as, “threats to life or bodily integrity, or as a close personal encounter with violence and death” (Herman, 33). As Edkins suggests, traumatic encounters unsettle the both the character and narrative arc, thus altering the linear, historical time which humans normally experience (Trauma and the Memory of Politics, 40; “Time, Personhood, Politics,” 131-135). The reader continually interprets the interactions between settler-colonial actors and the narrator’s father in terms of disrupting the latter’s normal social, cultural, and historical trajectory. Recurring events of theft and destruction, “that such and such an event had taken place that winter, when a motor-boat broke open the storage house in his summer camp and his fur clothing was stolen” (54-55), “One winter, in his logging camp, his best reindeer team was gone” (55), and “In berry season, a
A helicopter landed near the autumn village and made off with all the deer hides and raw materials for winter clothing and boots” (55) point the reader to see the tension between Khanty seasonal rhythms and the larceny perpetrated by outsiders. The trauma of such thefts are anything but innocuous, “much more than my father, the hunter, could ever comprehend in a lifetime” (55), further pointing the reader to see how the trauma of settler violence has disrupted the arc of the father’s traditional existence. In response to the narrator’s query about what he can do to help his father feel restored, the older man replies,

“Nothing. Just give me land. Some land where I can pasture the deer, hunt, and fish. Give me some land where my deer would feel safe from the teeth of stray dogs, where my hunting paths won’t be trampled by poachers and machines...I need land where my own house, my sacred site and resting-place, would be safe. I need land where I won’t be robbed of my clothing and my boots in broad daylight. Not someone else’s land, but my own. Just a little patch, a tiny speck, of my own” (56).

Thus the father’s journey into trauma time —those periods of social and political life which are disrupted following the occurrence of a traumatic event (Trauma and the Memory of Politics, xvi) —is complete. The father’s home, security, and way of life has become completely disrupted by the settler-state vanguard through the trauma of theft, violence, and colonial appropriation. The reader can clearly see the father’s longing for a return to his former existence, free from traumatic encounters where he is always the other, the object, the aggrieved. Further, the arc of the father’s story shows the reader how the unsettling nature of traumatic events can speak for the larger cultural devastation, the loss of the Khanty “life-space” (54).
Settler-colonialism can be understood as a wholesale displacement and destruction of indigenous populations through the administration of various forms of violence. The reader encounters the ways in which Russian settler-colonialism directs violence at staples of Khanty tradition, such as land and sites of cultural heritage, thus disrupting the normal pattern of lived experience. “Oilmen, conquering ‘virgin territory’ cut a winter road through the forest of our clan from Nizhnevartosk to their base settlement at New Agansk” (54) speaks directly to settler appropriation of Khanty territory under the guise of *terra nullius*, land ripe for occupation and extraction at the hands of the settlers. Sacred Khanty territory become sites of theft, “Out of sheer greed, those who conquered this ‘virgin territory’ have plundered the grave of my uncle, Aipin Nikolai...and of my other uncle Aipin Peter” (59). Recounting a story from relatives living near the Yugan River, the narrator reveals that, “The various conquerors of ‘virgin territory’ break into the hunting huts on our native grounds and take whatever items they like. Boats and motors, our basic necessities, disappear. And from year to year, it is becoming more difficult to preserve our cemeteries” (62). These traumatic encounters disrupt the linear existence of Khanty clan life in both a physical and sacred sense so that the reader comes to appreciate the narrator's claim that, “under the pressure of the oil invasion, the last guardians of the spiritual and material traditions are dying out” (64).

Khanty clans’ traumatic encounters with settler-colonial agents is front and center within the narrative, where the cultural destruction of the clan’s “Sacred Hill (is) desecrated with filth and refuse” by the oil firms and, “the state clear-cutting agency felled trees at the clan cemetery, devastating our eternal resting place” (55) are part of the Khanty’s colonized experience. However, the trauma of forced displacement is not simply reserved for the Khanty dead. Just as the narrator’s father is encircled and trapped, cut off from his home territory by the conquering oil industry (55-56), so too are other clans in the region. “The Pim Khanty living near the Surgut have
it the worst. They are besieged on all sides by oil sites and drilling sites. They are being driven from their native grounds, rushing between drilling stations, oil pipes, and concrete highways with their families and possessions in tow” (60). The narrator’s description of desecrated sacred land not only serves as a device to showcase the disruption of Khanty lived cultural experiences, it is also rooted in real and immediate events in Western Siberia, as Aipin himself reports in his capacity as a member of the local Duma (“Russia: Oil companies inching closer to Khanty sacred sites”). Thus, by straddling both the text and news of events outside of the page, the reader can see the extent to which Russian settler-colonialism has impacted Khanty clan life. Unable to continue their traditional nomadic lives, maintain and cultivate their traditional hunting territories, or sustain their sacred and economic spaces, the narrator reveals that the Khanty die, “from a sense of hopelessness, a sense of doom” (56); the direct consequence of encounters with settler-colonial powers.

The clarity and urgency of Aipin’s traumatic narrative implicitly provokes the reader to seek out the extent to which such events occur in worlds outside of the essay. Land disputes are at the core of tensions between the Russian settler-state and indigenous peoples in the Khanty-Mansi autonomous area of Western Siberia. Under Russian Federal law, indigenous persons do not have a right to own land per se. Provisions were made following the collapse of the Soviet Union to give some measure of sovereignty to Khanty people who could provide documentation to inhabiting ancestral lands, although the Khanty were routinely disposed of and forcibly removed from these lands under Soviet occupation in the 20th century, thus establishing evidence of continuous inhabitance on traditional tribal lands is extremely difficult to prove. Currently, those Khanty who do have land permits have some de jure power to approve state-backed firms’ extraction of oil, natural gas, and other resources from their land. However, oil firms rarely secure such approval and the Russian Federal government does little to enforce rules or punish vio-
lators ("Oil Companies Steal Khanty Land"). This ambiguity between written rules and loose rule enforcement creates a _de facto_ system of _terra nullius_ throughout much of Western Siberia. Such activities are not simply limited to the forced displacement of Khanty and other indigenous groups in the region. Land is clear cut for drilling and mining, as well as the building of roads and villages for the oil industry settlers, while waterways are diverted, simply blocked, and often irreparably polluted as a part of the resource extraction process. More recently, the Russian government has sought to resolve this tension between rules and practice by working to unwind agreements made with Khanty and other indigenous Siberian groups in the 1990s ("Khanty protection laws removed"). These actions include the elimination of rules protecting, "indigenous Territories of Traditional Nature Use" (TTNU) from the list of "specially protected conservation areas," ("Russia: Legislative change to demolish indigenous land rights") as well as the marginalization or outright prohibition of indigenous political groups ("Russian indigenous peoples’ organization ordered to close"), leaving individual Khanty people and clans isolated when standing up to the settler-state backed petroleum giants Gazprom, Lukoil, Rosfnet, Transneft, and Yukos ("Reindeer herders take on Russian oil-giant as tribal rights in Siberia weakened").

**Missing Persons**

Settler-colonialism inflicts a variety of trauma on colonized populations, not the least of which comes in the form of the unanticipated corporeal departure of individuals and the physical disappearance of livestock and territory. This theme is particularly important as the number of Khanty living in their traditional homelands has only increased by a mere seven thousand persons in the near century between 1939 and 2010, while the percentage Khanty as share of the total local population has declined from roughly 13% to just over 1% in the same time period. The narrator recites a butcher’s bill, evoking images of casualty counts during wartime or following a disaster, of those Khanty who have gone missing from their communities:
“Before their time, almost all my cousins and second cousins perished.

Aipin Yefin fell from a boat and drowned.

Aipin Galaktion drowned, returning from the settlement during a thaw.

Aipin Kikita fell from a motorboat and drowned.

Aipin Dmitri fell from a motorboat and drowned.

Aipin Aisir, returning from the settlement, froze on the road. Then his wife, with her deer team, on the same winter road, was killed by a truck. A

Aipin Anton fell from a dock into the river and drowned.

Aipin Maxim, at the age of seventeen, was shot point blank by a drunken logger, a newcomer in town.

Leikov Galaktion fell from a boat and drowned.

Leikov Leonid fell from a boat and drowned.

My uncle Aipin Vasilli Efremovich fell asleep in a drunken stupor and never woke up.

Aipin Mikhail fell asleep in a drunken stupor and never woke up” (56-57).

This line-by-line narration provides the reader with stark, simple obituaries to process. The reader comes to understand that, “all of them, except Maxim, had families and children,” subtly alluding to the dual consequences of these men’s deaths; the loss of the traditional hunter in the family as well as that of members of clan leadership. The consequences of these missing persons are later connected to the demise of community, vocational, cultural practices, and the ultimate death of the Khanty clans themselves. It is the narrator’s relatives, and by extension an entire generation of Khanty who have been “torn,” “contaminated by vodka and wine,” “corrupt-
“ed” and “severed”; the reader reciting each line separately, highlighting the traumatic magnitude expressed in the text (58).

The trope of missing personhood is extended through the narrator’s account of the disappearance of Khanty ways of life. The pending disappearance of the “Pim, Agan, and Vah, each with their own folklore, folk art, and language” marks the culmination of the ontical disappearance of the Khanty people, explicitly connecting the reader’s perception of trauma and death between the individual and the collective (61). While still physically present, Khanty men and women have become missing husbands, fathers, hunters, fishermen, craftsmen, wives, mothers, hearth-keepers, clothiers, and cooks (57-58). This disappearance of Khanty cultural practices is paired with the loss of the generations’ identity in the new socioeconomic reality as missing vocations, government employees, millers, manual laborers, farmers and ranchers further whittle away at the already fragile sense of Khanty collective identity (58-59). Consequently, the reader comes to understand the narrator’s claim that “This is how my nieces and nephews became a lost generation, with no knowledge of their language and culture” as the traumatic culmination of an emotionally fragmented and incomplete collective identity (59). The migration of families from their traditional territory to cities and towns contributes to the loss of Khanty cultural knowledge and practices, simultaneously weakening the bonds of Khanty heritage and cutting off the perpetuation of traditional hunting, herding and fishing knowledge which are key to Khanty survival (57). “Nor did they (Khanty men and boys) make ‘the great leap from tribalism to socialism’ as all the sociologists proclaimed. None of them became oilmen, builders, or geologists. Why? Because most of them never were schooled beyond the eighth grade. They remain uneducated and therefore unwanted --in the village, the city, the taiga, the oil business” (57). This loss of economic sovereignty is not confined to a single gender however as (for women), “Their fate was more dramatic. They lost the thing without no nation can continue: they can never be wives,
Aipin’s juxtaposition of the individual and the collective as a way of articulating traumatic themes, a figuration that occurs steadily throughout the essay. At the personal level, trauma impacts the narrator who routinely describes himself in various stages of incompleteness. The reader encounters the narrator’s psychically spectral position from the outset of the essay, “I am a shadow, a phantom. I am here, and yet I am not. You hear me and yet you don’t” (54) to the conclusion “I am a ghost. I do not exist” (65). The reader is invited to consider the metaphor of the narrator's death, “Once, twice, even three times --I have died.” (54), not as an visual departure from the world, but as a figurative representation of the fragmented nature of the Khanty themselves, disrupted by traumatic encounters with Russian settler-colonizers. Understanding the metaphor of the narrator’s waning identity, the reader is then able to confront
the collective loss of the Khanty themselves, “If everything continues as it is now, my kinsman will not only get nothing, but they will also lose the last of what they still have” (65). This is not simple hyperbole, but a direct alignment to the plight of the Khanty of Western Siberia. In a 2015 letter signed by the heads of the Sardakov, Shchukleyev, Sopochin, Lebedev, Aipin and Mayorov Khanty clans to the regional governor, they write:

““By polluting rivers and lakes and destroying our pastures, depriving us of our traditional way of life and eradicating our traditions and customs, forcing our people to abandon their traditional way of life, the oil companies are accelerating the extinction of our indigenous people. If their objective is to destroy us as a people, then, the oil companies and corrupt officials have chosen the right methods” (“Russia: "They want to destroy us as a people").

Discussion

The twin concerns of my preceding reading, that the narrative form highlights the ways in which settler-colonial actors disrupt the lived experience of the Khanty people, and that the text itself invites the reader to explore the contemporary politics of Western Siberia, rests on a rather difficult proposition; how does one interpret indigenous literature which clearly has at least one foot in the world outside of the page? Perhaps reading work such as Aipin's fits within Goethe's conceptualization of world literature as a way of understanding the cultural self-actualization of 'otherness', although such an approach may serve more to retain ideational binaries than to disrupt them. It could seem reasonable to locate Aipin’s essay within the confines of post-colonial literature. However, the text itself does not come across as a response to colonial ideology in the ways that A Tempest and Wide Sargasso Sea do. Reading "And So Dies My Clan" through an Orientalist lens is problematic in that the text could be understood both as functionally framing indige-
ous populations as victims, as well as an articulation of a legitimate, lived experience of the Khanty people; both positions, interestingly, suggest the reader interrogate such regimes of truth. Aipin’s essay is perhaps an example of subaltern speech, written by an indigenous author speaking on behalf of a people which most audiences are unfamiliar with. Yet it is still a story which has been translated into English, unheard by the reader in the Khanty oral tradition, and written in a form familiar to a Western audience. “And So Dies My Clan” may have the hallmarks of Bhabhian hybridity, but the narrator’s speech also exhibits varieties of settler-colonial mimicry in the ways in which events and themes are contextualized around Western conceptions of sovereignty, cultural practices, and norms of material possession. Nor does Aipin’s story adhere to Andersonian logic of an imagined community, as the narrator depicts the Khanty neither as self-referential nor sovereign in the face of the Russian settler-state and their petrochemical clients. Furthermore, the complicated position of the text —is it nonfiction or fiction? to what extent is the essay allegorical, historical, or political? —problematises the location of this text neatly within existing boundaries of genre and form. Does one read post-colonial literature for the ways in which it articulates larger cultural conditions and experiences with implicit and explicit political implications, as cultural theorists would suggest we do, or is the genre to be interpreted strictly within the confines of how the reader engages with the text from the first letter to the final punctuation?

From a slightly different perspective, Aipin’s essay is not offered as a testimonio the way Rigoberta Menchu and other authors of indigenous literature have articulated their personal and collective history of trauma at the hands of settler-colonial states. However, elements of Aipin’s narrator’s tale are clearly relatable to political realities and experiences, and thus could be tangentially related to this subgenre of indigenous and post-colonial literature. Aipin’s descriptions are concrete and yet speculative, intertwining the real and the perhaps fictitious, pushing the
reader to wrestle with the palpable experience of indigenous extinction at the hands of the Russian settler-state, while simultaneously accepting tropes of imagined death and destruction from the narrator himself. Does the reader, whom we could safely assume lacks the cultural knowledge of specific indigenous populations, seek to engage with a wider cultural study of such clans, tribes, and peoples or does she simply stick to an exegesis of what is articulated on the page?

In the end, I’m not sure of the extent to which I can offer clear answers to any of these questions. What makes Aipin's work here so valuable is the very instability and uncertainty of the form; it is at once provocative, sorrowful, and alluring. Borrowing from proposals laid out by indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson, what I can suggest that if a reader is genuinely concerned with expanding the canonical boundaries of literature, is committed to engaging with issues of social justice such as indigenous human rights, peace, and climate change, and is willing to accept one’s own position in a global body politic, then it is incumbent upon them to take up the study, and embrace a pedagogy, which includes work such as Aipin’s with an eye towards both form and function of text for the reader, as well as to the wider cultural, political, and social phenomena to which it references.


