RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Continental Archipelago of Norilsk

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Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn made famous the image of the Soviet prison system Gulag as an archipelago. In this paper, Solzhenitsyn’s idea of the Gulag archipelago is juxtaposed with French Caribbean writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s notion of archipelagic thinking. The focus is on the mining city Norilsk in Northern Siberia, one of the “islands” in this penal geography, a city that was largely built using forced labour. It is a long way from the Caribbean to Siberia, but both archipelagos (real and conceptual) share a history that can be termed colonial. While the system that created this penal archipelago of the Gulag was, in Glissant’s terms, a manifestation of thoroughly continental thinking, complete with grand, universalizing tendencies, it may also be possible to sense the diversity and interconnectedness that he attributed to the archipelago. The case of Norilsk is examined through the 2017 documentary A Moon of Nickel and Ice by Canadian film-maker Françoise Jacob. Glissant’s ideas are used to open up and pose questions, rather than to provide definitive answers.

Keywords: Norilsk; Solzhenitsyn; Gulag; Glissant; archipelagic thinking

Introduction

For any purpose, the Siberian city Norilsk is a rather extreme example. Located north of the 69th parallel, it is home to frequent storms and hurricanes, winter temperatures of −50°C, midnight sun, and months of midwinter darkness. Norilsk is a remote industrial city, more than 1000 km from the nearest road, its c.177,000 inhabitants frequently refer to the rest of Russia as materik – the mainland or continent. The city, which was originally built using forced labour as part of the Soviet prison system known as the Gulag, lies above one of the world’s largest nickel deposits. Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, one of the best-known chroniclers of the Soviet system of forced labour, made famous the image of the Gulag as an archipelago. Some camps were located on islands surrounded by water, while others were surrounded by land. Norilsk was one such land-locked island in this vast archipelago of force.

Solzhenitsyn’s central works all deal with the Gulag. Spanning seven parts and several volumes, his monumental book The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and central in winning him the 1974 Nobel Prize for literature. Sometimes labelled a novel and sometimes as non-fiction, The Gulag Archipelago is based on the author’s own experience of the camps, as well as documents and interviews with 227 fellow prisoners. It is presented as an attempt at an artistic study of the Soviet prison system rather than as a scholarly piece of writing. In the opening section of The Gulag Archipelago, after conjuring the image of prisoners eating prehistoric animals frozen within the Kolyma ice, Solzhenitsyn describes the prison system as a multitude of island camps, geographically scattered like an archipelago but psychologically tied together as a continent. The Gulag was an almost invisible, almost unnoticeable land, inhabited by the “zek people” (zech is Russian slang for inmate). Solzhenitsyn describes how the Gulag archipelago divides the country and cuts into cities, hangs over streets, yet it remains nearly invisible for many people, while all too tangible for others (Solzhenitsyn 2006: 7).

The centre of its own cluster of islands camps, Norilsk was established as a prison colony and mining outpost in the 1930s. After the closure of the camps in the mid-1950s, Norilsk remained and has become the largest city built on permafrost in the world. To this day it is still closely amalgamated with the extractive company Norilsk Nickel. In the following discussion of Norilsk, island or city, I draw on French Caribbean writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s notion of the archipelago. Like Solzhenitsyn, Glissant used the archipelago as a practice and metaphor in

1 The acronym Gulag is derived from Glavnoye Upravleniye ispraviteyno-trudovykhLAGerey i koloniy (Main Administration of Corrective Labour Camps and Settlements). It is usually treated as a proper name in English and as an acronym in Russian.
2 Kolyma is a region in north-east Siberia, along the Kolyma river. It is known for its Gulag labour camps and gold mines.
his thinking, highlighting both separation and interconnectedness. In his case, the archipelago was the significantly warmer Antilles. However, the islands in this Caribbean archipelago, in common with those in Siberia, have a dark history of forced labour and colonization. In Glissant’s thinking, the scattered archipelago was juxtaposed with the continent as different modes of thought and relating to the world. Continental thinking is system thinking, a mode of thought that Glissant associated with European colonial efforts (Wiedorn 2018: 8). While Glissant focused on the European colonial powers, or the West-as-project, characterized by imposing itself on others (Wiedorn 2018: 105), his characterization of continental thought is no less fitting for the Soviet Union. Glissant suggested that continental thought is bold, as it makes the “mind sprint with audacity” but this also means that the world is viewed from a distance as “a bloc, taken wholesale, all-at-once” (Glissant 2012: 41). Continental thought produces reductive and homogenizing syntheses (Wiedorn 2018: 113–114). The Soviet system that created the Gulag archipelago was similarly a manifestation of thoroughly continental thinking in its grand, universalizing tendencies to impose hegemonic ideas on conquered territories.

In contrast to continental thought, archipelagic thought celebrates particularity: “With archipelagic thought, we know the rivers’ rocks, without a doubt even the smallest ones” (Glissant 2012: 41). Whereas continental thinking is systemic, aiming to catch the world at large, archipelagic thinking is focused on detail: it is about knowing even the smallest rocks in the river, it reveals the shadows opened and closed by thinking (Glissant 2012: 41). Glissantian philosophy is place-based. He suggested we enter the world from a place, and we carry this place with us. These are his “common places” and he thus places the local as the precondition for interacting with the world at large (Kullberg 2012).

For Glissant, archipelagic thought meant embracing ambiguity, which followed from the rejection of system thinking. Systems imply exclusiveness and predictability. Thus, ambiguity is not a defect but rather a reflection of the true state of the world. If systems demand clarity, archipelagic thought realizes that the world is full of murky details (Wiedorn 2018: 9).

The ideologically driven Soviet Union stands as an extreme example of continental thinking, not only systemic, but also totalitarian. The rush to conquer the North and to harvest its resources led to the creation of numerous new towns with the sole purpose of extracting mineral resources. As Russian anthropologist Alla Bolotova has noted,

> The official Soviet discourse supposed that the people who populated the north would take pride in taming and reconstructing the environment: to conquer the poles, to change the course of rivers, to move mountains and, most importantly, to build cities and factories. (Bolotova 2012: 645)

This thinking created Norilsk, the place to which prisoners were shipped off to extract the metals and bring them back to the “mainland”. However, in its isolation, in the adoptions of newcomers to this part of the world, can we see glimpses of archipelagic thinking? Did these archipelagic elements enable people to make Norilsk not only a place where they were sent and exist, but also their home?

In terms of physical geography, Norilsk appears to be a continental island, surrounded by a sea of tundra. In this text, I discuss the interrelated contrasts of life in the city as they are presented in Canadian filmmaker Françoise Jacob’s portrait of Norilsk, entitled A Moon of Nickel and Ice (2017, 110 min), in which the idea of both contrast and interrelationship between the archipelago and the continent is applied. In Michael Wiedorn’s discussion of archipelagic thinking and paradox in the work of Glissant, he stresses the role of ambiguity and binary oppositions. In this thinking, binary oppositions are both problematic and indispensable (Wiedorn 2018: 109). They are opposites, but also interrelated. Taking this as a point of departure, my text is structured around a few pairs of interrelated oppositions that are central to Norilsk: isolation with interconnectedness, conquest with adaptation, memory with forgetting, and coldness with warmth. All of the pairs express the ambiguity of life in the city.

**Representing a Closed City**

One segment of A Moon of Nickel and Ice features images of Norilsk in winter sunshine, with snowy streets, older and newer houses, smoking chimneys, accompanied by the voice of Alexander Kharitonov, one of the protagonists of the film, telling the viewer that Norilsk is a unique city (Figure 1). It is a city of inhuman conditions, built through coercion. Using typically concise Russian, Kharitonov goes on to say that if it were not for Norilsk, everything would be simpler in the Arctic: “Приехали, поработали, замерз, и уехали” (Arrive, work for some time, freeze, and leave). Kharitonov’s words seem to imply that the actual construction of the city complicates matters in the sense that it brings life or everyday existence into the equation of extracting the resources of the north. A city is a place in which to live and Kharitonov relates that he has lived in Norilsk since 1967 (presumably, he arrived as a small child) but, he says, “nobody stays that long”; as the film unfolds, the viewer gets glimpses of Kharitonov’s ambiguous relationship with the city. He expresses both profound attachment to a city where he has spent most of his life and his dedication to preserving its troubled history, but he often derides Norilsk as an impossible place in which to live.

Given the inhospitable conditions, the construction of Norilsk was a remarkable achievement (Figure 2). The city has been called the second most polluted city in the world, and for the most of its history it has been designated a secret or “closed” city by the Soviet and Russian authorities. Its image is harsh, dystopian and futuristic. A Moon of Nickel and Ice approaches the city from the point of view of its extremity, but end up, if not in ordinariness, in Norilsk as a place...
of everyday existence. In this respect, I think it espouses a form of archipelagic thinking. With an attention to detail, the film, to paraphrase Glissant, senses the stones in the metaphorical river of Norilsk. It might be extreme, but it is people’s home.

*Figure 1:* City Panorama overlaid with the voice of protagonist Alexander Kharitonov, speaking about how the city was founded. Frame from *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, c. 18 min.

*Figure 2:* City Panorama overlaid with the voice of protagonist Alexander Kharitonov, speaking about the conditions for the city. Frame from *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, c. 18 min.

*A Moon of Nickel and Ice* is Jacob’s first full-length film, produced by the small production company Les Films du 3 mars. The film has a scattered narrative style, where each shot or segment is its own island, only loosely connected to the other segments. Even when a person returns, the narrative is not coherent. The film does not have a unifying voice-over, although image and sound are often split. There is heavy reliance on interviews, but to avoid too many “talking head” scenes, the voice is often overlaid with other images. The film features three generations: Gulag survivor Lev Netto, middle-aged theatre director Anna Babanova, Lithuanian miner Grigaras Sipavichus, and the already introduced photographer and advertisement bureau director Alexander Kharitonov, as well as teenagers Katia (Ekaterina-Marta Stipaniuk) and Vittia (Viktor Pashin). The protagonists are not introduced in a consistent way and the viewer must piece together what little is revealed to form an image of each character. The film includes both reflexive and observational material, and the camera is sometimes ignored and sometimes referenced. The documentary was filmed during several visits to the city; time markers from both 2014 and 2015 occasionally appear in the frames, the protagonists change their appearance and hairstyle, and darkness and light change in a way as to suggest that the scenes were filmed during different seasons, although the snow is nearly always there, which is not unexpected given that Norilsk has snow for about nine months of the year.
The origins of Norilsk as a metallurgical industrial complex are still apparent. They are a significant part of the film’s visual landscape. The factories, the mines and smelters are integrated into the city to the extent that it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. The military significance of the industry means that Norilsk has remained a “closed city”. Secrecy was a key feature of information management in the Soviet Union, and the closed cities became a notable institutional feature of the system. Often, the cities were built in remote areas and not marked on maps. Not surprisingly, the cities were off-limits to foreigners, but strict controls also applied to Soviet citizens with respect to visiting, leaving or moving to such cities. Norilsk is one of 44 still publicly acknowledged closed cities in Russia. Despite this, as is evident from Jacob’s work, its closed status does not make it impossible for foreigners to visit or even film in the city, although to do so requires a considerable amount of determination in organizing and acquiring the necessary permits.

**Isolation with Interconnectedness**

Norilsk is far removed from the more densely populated areas of Russia. It is a city island cut off from the mainland by thousands of kilometres of land, and as teenager Katia says in Jacob’s film, “it is like you’re living on the moon”. The isolation and emptiness conjured in Jakob’s film are consistent with the way that the story of Norilsk often emphasizes creation ex nihilo — the construction of a city out of nothing, far away in an extreme climate. The construction of Norilsk has been hailed as a particular achievement of the Soviet regime (Laruelle and Hohmann 2017: 306). However, the image of emptiness obscures another existence. The point has been frequently made that what is seen as wilderness by states might be someone else’s domesticated world, and the Russian far north is home to several indigenous people or “small peoples of the north” as they are usually termed in Russia. Norilsk is situated on the Taimyr Peninsula, the traditional lands of the Nenets, Nganasan and Dolgan peoples. During the Russian Empire, they were sovereign tribute-paying nationalities (Ziker 2010: 104).

Administratively, Norilsk is an island, a self-contained district, surrounded by Taimyrskii Dolgano-Nenetskii District, of which Dudinka is the administrative centre. Dudinka, a port city on the Yenisei river, is accessible all year round to seagoing vessels and the produce from Norilsk is shipped from there. The indigenous populations of the Taimyr Peninsula are currently urbanizing, settling in Norilsk and more frequently in Dudinka (Laruelle and Hohmann 2017: 314). Thus, as is evident from the presence of the indigenous population, the area where Norilsk was created was by no means “empty”. The establishment of the city, the extractive projects and the associated infrastructure impacted on the traditional way of life; for instance, pipeline construction has hindered reindeer migratory routes (Pryde 1991: 172–174). However, even greater impact resulted from the way that Soviet powers reorganized the indigenous population, making it sedentary and organized in collective farms. Beginning in the 1930s, the traditional ways of life, namely reindeer herding, fishing, hunting and associated activities, were collectivized and later turned into enterprise-style sovkhozes (state farms) with employed workers. During Soviet times, the indigenous populations of the Taimyr Peninsula supplied the city of Norilsk with food and other goods (Ziker 2001: 2010). Despite their contributions, indigenous people are generally written out of the story of Norilsk.

Isolation is also a prominent theme in Victoria Fiore’s short film *My Deadly Beautiful City* (2016, 11 minutes). This is a captivating and stylized portrait of Norilsk, which opens with a shot of a snowy tundra and a voice that tells the viewer that there are no roads to Norilsk, that it is far away from everything else. The isolation is also stressed by director Victoria Fiore in her accompanying text about the film: not only are there no roads or rail heading there, but also access to the Internet is severely limited and the city is closed to foreigners. It is simply very difficult to get there. However, Fiore also emphasizes that, as one of the largest mining and metallurgical complexes in the world, Norilsk is very globally connected. The region is estimated to have about one-third of the world’s nickel and two-fifths of the palladium, as well as significant deposits of copper and cobalt (Ertz 2003). As Norilsk produces most of the earth’s palladium, an essential mineral in electronics and automobiles, “Most of us probably have a bit of Norilsk in our pockets, bags or home” (Fiore 2016). Fiore was intrigued about having this connection to such an alien place: “Norilsk was the most important city I’d never heard of’. It seemed to her a mysterious place stuck between a Soviet past and a dystopian future. As she finally managed to secure the necessary permits to enter the city, a process that took two years, she found a city where sulphur dioxide emissions endangered plant life, discoloured snow and reduced life expectancy. However, she also found a city where people took great pride in surviving what might seem to be against the odds. The citizens of Norilsk frequently expressed their love for the city, and she wanted to capture this in the film. One scene features a city panorama with chimneys and heavy smoke, with a woman telling the viewers that for the citizens of Norilsk, it is a very dear view. The Russian word she uses is rodnoi, indicating that it is both native and close to the heart.

Thus, Norilsk is simultaneously remote and globally connected. This dual sense of isolation and interconnectedness is intrinsic to Glissant’s idea of the archipelago, as it is made up of islands that are both distinct and related. However, both isolation and interconnectedness are also continental, especially in the expressed material (mineral) forms of interconnectedness, as extraction is a manifestation of conquest.

**Conquest with Adaptation**

Permafrost created special challenges during the construction of Norilsk, as foundations conduct heat and melt the permafrost, causing buildings to sink. The construction of Norilsk was in many ways a trial-and-error process, in which the city served as a full-scale natural laboratory. In order to construct multistorey buildings of brick and concrete, a special technique was developed over the course of more than a decade based on precast concrete piles that were drilled and
frozen into the ground. A further challenge was drifting snow, which could accumulate high as two-storey buildings. Soviet planners attempted to use buildings as shielding and to redirect snow in order to reduce the need for fences and snow removal (Jull 2017: 296–297). Snow and cold are physical realities that continue to shape the appearance of the city today.

The story of Norilsk is a narrative of conquering and taming nature. As Bolotova has noted, the creation of new cities “out of nothing” in tough northern environments was a manifestation of the power and success of the socialist regime: “The idea of mastering the north exemplified the quintessence of high modernism, imported as an absolute belief in the progress, technique and unlimited capability of control over nature and humans” (Bolotova 2012: 650). In Fiore’s short film, discussed in the preceding section, the conquest – the creation of a city in the snowy desert – is presented as the basis of the inhabitants’ affection and sense of home. It is life quite separated from nature, where every precaution is taken to shield life from the inhospitable environment. It is possible that continental thinking is most clearly manifested in the narratives of conquest, despite the apparent distance from the continent. However, local conditions were not only to be conquered but also to be adapted to, making conquest more ambiguous than it may seem.

The prime example of conquest is the company Norilsk Nickel (now Nornickel, often referred to as the kombinat). The extraction of resources is the basis of the city’s existence, and, from its Norillag (an amalgam of Norilsk and lager – camp) origins, the company has been closely amalgamated with the city. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Norilsk Nickel became a global giant with plans and mining operations not only in Norilsk but also elsewhere. Everyone in Norilsk has a relationship with the kombinat in some way or other. Although privatized in the 1990s, Nornickel is still considered to have strategic importance and maintains deep ties with the authorities (Laruelle and Hohmann 2017: 306). The close connection between company and city is still in place: it employs 45% of the active Norilsk workforce and, through subcontracting, an even greater proportion of the population works for the company (Laruelle and Hohmann 2017: 316).

In A Moon of Nickel and Ice, Nornickel is referenced as a monolith, as the autocrat of Norilsk, where nothing would ever go against the company’s will. Alexander Kharitonov tells the viewer that Norilsk would not exist without Nornickel, that the company decides everything. However, Jacob’s film also conveys a sense of resistance or ironic indifference to the company (Figure 3).

Halfway through the film an advertisement for the 80th anniversary of Norilsk Nickel is shown, with the slogan “We are building the future”. Next, there is a cut to theatre director Anna Babanova, who hurries into a building and leaves her coat for what turns out to be a company event (possibly the advertised 80-year celebration). She appears to serve as a judge in a comedy contest. A snippet of an onstage joke, judged as average by the jury, is shown before cutting to an interview with two company representatives who are talking about how the company strives to host activities for “young specialists” in the hope of having them meet someone and raise a family in Norilsk, as well as about events for the children to motivate them to want to work for the company themselves. The interview is ironically intercut with a shot of the teenager Vitia and two of his friends, who demonstrate profound indifference to their parents’ work at Nornickel and no inclination whatsoever to work for the company themselves. The sequence cuts back to the company event, where the speaker announces that the new anthem of Nornickel is to be performed. Judging from the lyrics of the song, it is a humorous anthem, although a shot of Anna Babanova laughing is the only visual indication of this. The intercut images of the audience in Nornickel baseball caps and the closing shot of a stage filled with people holding Nornickel coloured balloons and portraits of Vladimir Putin leave the viewer with the impression of a gigantic propaganda performance.

Figure 3: Images of pipes and industrial structures overlaid with voice of protagonist Alexander Kharitonov, speaking about how Nornickel decides everything in the city. Frame from A Moon of Nickel and Ice, c. 22 min.
Memory with Forgetting

The Gulag’s origin is a prominent theme in *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, told through Lev Netto’s reminiscences, archival footage, and both Alexander Kharitonov and Anna Babanova’s attempts to preserve the memory. Kharitonov appears as both authority and activist. In one segment of the film, he states “You can’t live without memory” and in another he removes the snow from his grandfather’s grave and tells his story as a prisoner in the Norillag, including how he and his friends carried it with them in their post-camp life (Figure 4). The film also gives space to the drawings of Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya, which in unnerving detail depict the horrors of life in the camps. The camera follows Kharitonov and Babanova as they drive to the now abandoned hospital where Kersnovskaya used to work (Figure 5).

In yet another moving sequence, Kharitonov tells, partly as a “talking head” and partly as voice overlaid with images of construction work, the story about a Gulag cemetery that in the 1980s was discovered during construction work. The sight of human remains at the construction site unnerved the workers, as the cemetery had been forgotten; no one talked about it and few remembered it. Kharitonov says that the incident was swept under the carpet. The bones were taken away and hidden somewhere.

![Figure 4: Protagonist Alexander Kharitonov clearing snow from his grandfather’s grave. Frame from *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, c. 45 min.](image)

![Figure 5: Protagonists Alexander Kharitonov and Anna Babanova looking for the building of the former hospital where Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya, whose drawings from the Norillag camps are featured in the film, used to work. Frame from *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, c. 1 h 20 min.](image)
Thus, the Gulag archipelago still hangs over Norilsk, to paraphrase Solzhenitsyn. The archipelago is often invisible, but all too tangible at times when the dark past resurfaces. It has often been noted how victims of Soviet repression rarely spoke of their experiences (cf. Merridale 2000). After returning home following many years in camps, even close family members were never told about those years, as it was safer not to know. *A Moon of Nickel and Ice* follows the description of the memory of Gulag as ignored, hidden and repressed. The film itself can be seen as an act of remembrance. However, memory and forgetting belong together, just as light and shadow are interrelated (Torell 2015). Wiedorn points to Glissant’s linking of the concepts and how, for Glissant, forgetting was not only memory’s dark opposition but also potentially empowering (Wiedorn 2018).

In Jacob’s film, forgetting is both dark and light. Alexander Kharitonov explicitly contrasts the Norilsk that was with the Norilsk that is. There is a nostalgic glow to the city of his youth, which was a time when life in Norilsk was privileged, as northern benefits such as higher wages were used to attract people. In a short text on the city, journalist and Norilsk-native Ian Evtushenko writes that smiles spread over my parents faces when they reminisce of how their local supermarkets were overflowing with sweetened milk, while you could hardly find a block of margarine in the rest of the Soviet Union (Evtushenko 2015) (on privilege in closed cities, see also Emeliantseva 2011).

The fall of the Soviet Union meant an end to the time of privilege. The theme of decline is touched upon many times in *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*. Miner Grigaras Sipavichus talks about the empty foundations, striking symbols of how people leave the city, as several shots of abandoned buildings are displayed (Figures 6 and 7). The foundations also symbolize

**Figure 6:** Empty foundations shown overlaid with music after miner Grigaras Sipavichus has talked about how houses disappear but foundations remain. Frame from *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, c. 1 h 32 min.

**Figure 7:** Empty houses and foundations shown overlaid with music after miner Grigaras Sipavichus has talked about how houses disappear but foundations remain. Frame from *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, c. 1 h 32 min.
Cold Weather with Human Warmth

Throughout its relatively short history, migration has been a significant feature of Norilsk. With high in-migration and a high turnover of labour, only 15% of the population are “native” (i.e., born in the city). Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the city has been characterized by outmigration and a shrinking population. However, it has been shrinking less than other northern outposts, probably due to the relative stability and prosperity of Norilsk Nickel. With a current population of c.177,000 it is still a sizeable city. In recent years, migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia have become visible in the urban landscape, not primarily as industrial workers but as filling other niches than those filled by previous generations of newcomers (Laruelle and Hohmann 2017). After the vignette in the opening sequence of A Moon of Nickel and Ice, the camera “rides” in a truck that stops to assist a car stuck in snow. Those in the truck conclude that those in need of help are not Russians, but from the Caucasus and as the car door opens to the snowstorm, the car’s occupants are scolded for driving too fast. A rope is tied, the car pulled out of the snow, the newcomers wave their thanks through the wind and snow, and all parties continue on their way in the darkness. Several of the protagonists of the film are themselves not “natives”: the miner, Grigaras Sipavichus, came as a young man from Lithuania; Anna Babanova, the theatre director, similarly seems to have arrived in Norilsk as an adult; and Lev Netto was sent there by force, although it is never revealed whether he still lives in the city. As images of a dark city are shown, Anna Babanova asks “Where are all these people from? How did they end up here?” As if to answer this rhetorical question, the film cuts to an image of Grigaras as a young man in Navy uniform, and Grigaras tells the story of how he ended up in Norilsk after being blamed for an accident. Norilsk was a place where he could escape his troubles, and the viewer is left to wonder whether it still is a place of escape, as he appears estranged from his Lithuanian family. Grigaras presents Norilsk as escape, but also as an adventure. The same attraction of the north is also expressed by Evtushchenko: “Besides space, the Extreme North represented the last unexplored zone for Soviet-era Russians. Visiting it became a dream for many children in the 1960s—including the two people who would become my parents” (Evtushenko 2015).

Evtushchenko was born and raised in Norilsk and his already-cited text is a personal story of attachment to an extreme place, a love letter to the city of his childhood that he has since left, and a longing for home. It is also a love song to the city, to its extremity, to its inhabitants, and to the quirky little details that make up a life: “sometimes when my schoolyard was buried under snow, I had to clamber into my classroom through the window. We would leave through special tunnels dug under the snowdrift”. Evtushchenko also describes how he could swim all year round in Lake Dolgy: “The town’s heating pipes pass through it, so the water gets to a balmy 15 degrees”. For someone who grew up in Norilsk, the city is closely connected to people. Evtushchenko describes how he walked the dark city streets under the Northern Lights as a child, holding his mother’s hand, and he extends this sense of community to the inhabitants of Norilsk more generally, as if to say that in a cold climate people need to be warm:

The people of Norilsk are honest, and kind to each other, as inhabitants of the North often tend to be. It makes life easier. In Norilsk strangers often cross the road holding hands. They have to—it really is that windy. (Evtushenko 2015).

When the teenagers in A Moon of Nickel and Ice are asked what they would miss when they leave the city, they all mention the snow. The snow shapes reality and defines life in Norilsk. It has to be adapted to and it has become a symbol of the city. Due to the very long winters, there is nearly always snow there. Tunnels, heating pipes and snowballs can be compared with the rocks of the river conjured by Glissant and are the details and particularities that any careful study of the city are shown. Anna Babanova asks “Where are all these people from? How did they end up here?” As if to answer this rhetorical question, the film cuts to an image of Grigaras as a young man in Navy uniform, and Grigaras tells the story of how he ended up in Norilsk after being blamed for an accident. Norilsk was a place where he could escape his troubles, and the viewer is left to wonder whether it still is a place of escape, as he appears estranged from his Lithuanian family. Grigaras presents Norilsk as escape, but also as an adventure. The same attraction of the north is also expressed by Evtushchenko: “Besides space, the Extreme North represented the last unexplored zone for Soviet-era Russians. Visiting it became a dream for many children in the 1960s—including the two people who would become my parents” (Evtushenko 2015).

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The people of Norilsk are honest, and kind to each other, as inhabitants of the North often tend to be. It makes life easier. In Norilsk strangers often cross the road holding hands. They have to—it really is that windy. (Evtushenko 2015).

When the teenagers in A Moon of Nickel and Ice are asked what they would miss when they leave the city, they all mention the snow. The snow shapes reality and defines life in Norilsk. It has to be adapted to and it has become a symbol of the city. Due to the very long winters, there is nearly always snow there. Tunnels, heating pipes and snowballs can be compared with the rocks of the river conjured by Glissant and are the details and particularities that any careful study of the archipelago includes. The sound of the wind and the smell of gas lights show an attention to detail, including the seemingly irrelevant things that make up life. In the adaptation to life there is a departure from grand continental systems. In a cold climate people need to be warm:
Protagonist Alexander Kharitonov often complains that the city is an impossible place in which to live, but he also expresses a profound sense of attachment to it. When hosting a dinner party, in an almost Chekhovian scene in which the guests debate the conditions of existence, he derides the city. However, one of the guests, a younger woman, rejects the idea of Norilsk being an impossible place in which to live. She says: “We live here, don’t we” and continues to explain that her parents and grandparents lived there and that she does not have any other place where she can go. As Alexander Kharitonov insists that he will eventually leave the city, his friends tease him: “You have said that a long time now”. The teenager Vitia is preparing to leave the city, as his parents see a better future for him elsewhere; leaving is presented as their wish, not his own. The other teenager, Katia, is eager to move to St. Petersburg. Towards the end of the film, in a rare case of progression, she has apparently reached this goal and is filmed in the midst of noisy St. Petersburg traffic, in a comparatively mild climate, saying that maybe in many years from now she will miss her northern home, but for now she is just so happy to have escaped.

Conclusions: Belonging
The establishment of Norilsk marks the conquest of nature, permafrost, wind, and snow, but living in Norilsk is life with permafrost, wind, snow, pollution, and haunting memories. The film A Moon of Nickel and Ice presents Norilsk as a home. Attachment and belonging are expressed by all those featured in the film, despite frequent mixed feelings about the realities of life in the city. Conquest is mixed with adaption, isolation with interconnectedness, and memory with forgetting, and while in the Introduction to this text I have described continental and archipelagic thinking as contrasts, they too intermingle. The continental system that created Norilsk and that wanted to conquer the north still exists. Extraction is still the city’s primary mode of relating to the world, although it is hard to separate this from adaption to local conditions, to particularity and detail. The film shows how, in making Norilsk their home, the locals pay attention to even the smallest rock of its metaphorical river. This is their place of entering the world. The film reflects the ambiguity built into the idea of archipelagic thinking. Life can never be about conquest or about grand systems, no matter how continental the origins of the place may be. Rather, life is about detail, about the little things. In this sense, the extremity of Norilsk reveals the ordinariness of life. Norilsk is about darkness, Arctic storms and pollution, as well as friendship, shining Northern Lights and crisp, white snow.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

References


