

# **TOWARDS SELFHOOD: MEMORY, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY JOURNEY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an autoethnography based on a two week Trans-Siberian railway journey from Moscow to Vladivostok in October 2011. It explores the role of memory in our spatial surroundings, the effect remembering has on the way we move through and interpret the present and ourselves. In the chapters about community, rhythms, memory/imagination, and landscape the journey becomes a backbone for the personal narratives and the stories of others, which intertwining unveil the complex relationship between the self and the world, the present and the absent, and the imagined. Thesis explores the inevitable mobility of the mind, which sees us losing the ability to stay fastened to physical spaces, images and our own being, and opening the possibility to travel in time, space and memory. The physical landscape, landscape of Siberia gradually becomes almost invisible, disappears and re-emerges as a series of personal images and stories, feelings and dreams, suggesting that even moving through the vastest landscapes in the world we are always travelling inward, towards an understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

## CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>The Mammoths</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>About Siberia</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>The Dream of Greatness</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>Trans-Siberian during the Wars</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>Elena</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>Context</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>The Idea of Siberia</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Writing Others</b> .....	<b>57</b>
<b>Writing Memory</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>ABOUT COMMUNITY</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>The Carriage</b> .....	<b>69</b>
<b>Hot Water Boiler: Becoming a Community</b> .....	<b>80</b>
<b>Myth and Community: the Enchanting</b> .....	<b>87</b>
<b>Letter from the Stranger</b> .....	<b>94</b>
<b>ABOUT MEMORY AND IMAGINATION</b> .....	<b>99</b>
<b>Remembering</b> .....	<b>102</b>
<b>My Ghosts</b> .....	<b>109</b>
<b>ABOUT RHYTHMS</b> .....	<b>127</b>
<b>Trans-Siberian Rhythm</b> .....	<b>128</b>
<b>The Music</b> .....	<b>138</b>
<b>ABOUT LANDSCAPE</b> .....	<b>151</b>
<b>Approaching Landscape</b> .....	<b>154</b>
<b>Dreaming Landscape</b> .....	<b>156</b>
<b>The Dreams of the Siberian Landscape</b> .....	<b>161</b>
<b>The Girl</b> .....	<b>161</b>
<b>The Bread Sellers</b> .....	<b>163</b>
<b>The Bride</b> .....	<b>166</b>
<b>Baikal</b> .....	<b>169</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>175</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>187</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Nenet children eating raw deer meat and drinking blood [image] Available at: <a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=76c_1427100487">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=76c_1427100487</a> [Accessed April 2015].....	33
Figure 2 A group of Trans-Siberian workmen at the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway (1898) [image] Available at: <a href="http://www.transsib.ru/Photo/Old/old-237.jpg">http://www.transsib.ru/Photo/Old/old-237.jpg</a> [Accessed March 2015] .....	37
Figure 3 Scheme map of the Great Trans-Siberian Railway (1962) [image] Available at: <a href="http://www.transsib.ru/Map/transsib-building.gif">http://www.transsib.ru/Map/transsib-building.gif</a> [Accessed March 2014].....	39
Figure 4 Bridge over Irtysh blown up at the time of retreat of the White Army near Omsk, 1920 [image] Available at: from <a href="http://www.transsib.ru/Photo/Old/old-11.jpg">http://www.transsib.ru/Photo/Old/old-11.jpg</a> [Accessed March 2015] .....	42
Figure 5 Polish children on the train from Lugova to Krasnovodsk 23rd of March 1942 [image] Available at <a href="http://kresy-siberia.org/galleries/liberation/polish-armed-forces-in-ussr/">http://kresy-siberia.org/galleries/liberation/polish-armed-forces-in-ussr/</a> [Accessed 15 April 2015] .....	49
Figure 6 Letter from a stranger in my field diary .....	95
Figure 7 On the way home .....	107
Figure 8 My ghost.....	123
Figure 9 Metronome in motion (2008). [image] Available at: <a href="https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/metronome#/media/File:Metronome_Nikko.jpg">https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/metronome#/media/File:Metronome_Nikko.jpg</a> [Accessed 25 Jul. 2014].....	142
Figure 10 Gershwin Prelude II (Blue Lullaby) (2010) [image] Available at: <a href="http://nite-lite.net/mime/tabs/tab374">http://nite-lite.net/mime/tabs/tab374</a> [Accessed 25 Jul. 2014].....	145
Figure 11 Taiga .....	158
Figure 12 Zaur photographing me .....	173
Figure 13 Tibetan Buddhist Monks sand art (2016). [image] Available at: <a href="http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/tibetan-buddhist-monks-sand-art">http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/tibetan-buddhist-monks-sand-art</a> [Accessed 25 Jan 2016]. .....	185



## INTRODUCTION

I believe you have never read such an introduction to a PhD thesis before. But I hope that all the reasons why this particular one is written like this has to be written like this will be revealed as you continue further through this text, a text that was initially meant to depict my train journey through Siberia in October 2011. At present, I can only be sure that it did depict a journey. This chapter is the last one completed for this work, and I know at this point, that you need to know how this thesis came to be, and I want to explain as much to myself as to you, the reader, why I chose Siberia, slow travel through it on the train, this particular journey to write about, this particular place as perhaps the starting point of this thesis – of the journey it ends up talking about. I admit, I am almost itching to write it, because I can already hear its sentences working together in my head, I can see the images, the scenes, the meaning of those scenes crystallising, the words are gathering like a cloud over me, inside me, and I almost feel pressured, and yes, I long to tell, I *love* to tell, and this is how the whole journey and the journey through this work is completed: by telling.

I learned about the power of telling a long time ago. It was introduced to me by Nabokov's *Lolita* and if I have to name the book that had the biggest influence on me it would definitely be that one. I own that book now; it has a shiny white cover, its name imprinted on it in small black letters. I first read it secretly, of course, hiding it from my mother when I was about the age of Lolita herself because as well as *Ulysses* it was strictly forbidden to me, a pathological reader of 11, to touch. The telling in *Lolita* was extraordinary and as a child I expected that sort of telling to be present in all the books I read afterwards, the telling that would linger forever somewhere in my mind, like the impact of accidentally

touching a bare wire; a telling the depth and textures of which sunk into you layer after layer, image after image, the telling of many levels, a telling full of clues, brutal and sensitive, brutally sensitive, words written by somebody unapologetic and unrestrained, by somebody, I felt then, very honest, somebody free. The writing of this book affected me, writing, so alluring, inventive, exciting, sensual, and so eloquent that I envied Nabokov immediately and permanently for the ability to generate such a gripping power. And I believe that somehow, perhaps, this childish envy evolved and transformed into an ambition of my own: I also wanted to be able to tell. It is a little hard to acknowledge, but at some point of the process of writing, this thesis has become a manifestation of that ambition. But let me take you further, let me tell you about my Siberia, about my relationship with the land of solitude, or perhaps, with the land and with the solitude.

I shall begin where everything always begins, childhood.

My parents created a magical Christmas for us, me and my brother, when we were children; I can only now begin to appreciate the enormous effort my mother used to put into preparing the celebrations adhering to all the traditions coming from both Christian and pagan Lithuanian backgrounds: thick linen tablecloth with a layer of soft hay underneath for Christmas Evening fortune telling, 12 different meals on that table, including fresh poppy milk in little clay cups, pickled herring on sweet onion bed and a thick cranberry drink with whole berries that burst bitter sweetly in your mouth, symbolizing a prosperous 12 months of the year. There was also an extra seat on the table with an empty plate in front of it, on which my mother placed a tiny branch of pine for those, both me and my brother knew, who weren't with us to join the breaking of the thin wafer of Christ's body in the candlelit up room. I always wanted to sit next

to this empty seat, feeling uplifted, enchanted almost by the presence of someone, something I couldn't see, a ghost essentially, whose purpose there, invited to sit among us at our family table was not to haunt, but to confirm, enhance the understanding, the belief that the invisible, the spiritual exists among us with equal importance to that of those alive and visible. Several winters of my childhood had now blended into one memory of Christmas Eve when a horse sledge came to the door of our home, and we shrugged under the fleece and fur blankets, to be taken for a ride past the village into the nearest dense forest through the crispy sparkly snow. I used to lean back and look at the sky, listening to the sound of the snow cracking under the sledge, my parents voices in the seat behind us, and my own breathing, then turn my head slightly and watch my brother's face, which just like mine was illuminated by the amazement of the perfect, bottomless crisp clear winter's sky, with every single star bright and clearly visible. Just like Siberia, my father would remark, and then point at the Plough, and the North Star, as we continued to travel, marvelling at the sky and each other's faces. He often mentioned Siberia when the temperature outside dropped below 20 degrees Celsius, and he would come in from outside with a big Russian fox fur hat covered in a thick layer of snow, and that is how the first image of Siberia formed in my mind: cold, dark and beautiful, and mysterious, but somehow familiar just like the Plough and the North Star in the vastness of the night sky. It was never really that far away, even though it was unreachable. My father had been to Siberia several times, and coming back from these trips he used to bring back bags and bags of pine nuts, still in their tiny tough shells, which he used to open up for me during the long evenings of winter in front of the TV. Siberia tasted like pine nuts, oily, fragrant, a bit exotic, but unlike familiar sweet hazelnuts and almonds it left a



strange, alien yet pleasant sharpness on your palate. I grew out of this image of Siberia pretty soon; as a teenager I associated Siberia with *somewhere* away from it all, being in Siberia meant being lonely, separated, but content, with yourself and your thoughts as companions, somewhere in this loneliness, I was convinced then as much as I am now, you could see things somehow better, brighter, and illuminated just like when you were a child and looked at the stars and your brother's face in the freezing night of Lithuanian winter in the early 1990s.

I wanted to write. Consumed and inspired by reading in the first conscious decade of my existence I felt that I myself had the words. I won my first serious creative writing competition at the age of ten. It was organised by the European Council, and I presented a short, 500 word essay in which I wrote about an old picture of my grandmother. I have always been enchanted by old photographs. I have always been fascinated by my grandmother. I still am. That picture, around 80 years old now, portrayed my chubby, fair-headed 5-year-old grandmother with two of her overweight childless aunties who came from America wishing to take her back with them. I was born the moment, I wrote, when my grandmother ran crying into the lap of my great grandmother, for that very last hug just before getting onto the ferry and the moment my great grandmother refused to let her go, against all of her conscious will, very clearly understanding that this precious child in her lap, embracing the fleeting joy of her motherly warmth and smell, was now condemned to live a difficult, repressed life in a poor, war-ridden Lithuania. The story I wrote about my grandmother, inspired by an old faded photograph, was the very beginning of the realisation that as well as behind the presence of that empty seat on our Christmas Evening table at home, there was always a multitude of meanings

behind the objects, behind people and their actions, behind how and why things happened and why they only occurred in certain places at certain times. It was always also the matter if one could see them or one could not. I was desperate to see. Most amazing of all was the fact that those meanings could only be brought out by writing, by attempting to capture them, their fleeting enigmatic presence in words, and so give them some graspable substance. And there were so many words; I was overwhelmed by the abundance of them when I succumbed with a not at all childish passion to the pleasures of writing.

I continued to write, for myself and, reluctantly, for the endless competitions my language and literature teachers presented me with, and by the age of 16 I was acknowledged, with numerous diplomas, certificates and awards in my possession, as one of the most promising young writers in prose and drama in my small country, which had and still has a small, neglected community of promptly aging self-important authors and contributed nearly to nothing to the body of Great Eastern/Western Literature. Choice of a profession was a no-brainer; I was to become a journalist. In my head, that was the only way to access a career in writing, the possibility to do what I thought I could do well. For the first time in 18 years reality finally hit me with a real, almost brutal power. I had passed my high school exams with flying colours, I could compete with anybody, now the only obstacle standing between me and a place on a BA Journalism and Communication at the best university in Lithuania, in one of the most prestigious faculties of all times, was an oral exam in a form of an interview conducted by three members of the board. I failed it, that is, I scored only 8 out of 10, and that was the end of my dream. I can replay every moment of that interview. It took place in a room which had a feel of my first classroom in the primary school, bright and spacious, with four people at the large desk in

the middle of it and me in front of them. 10:15 in the morning, around 70 other candidates behind the door in the long corridor nervously waiting for their turn, and their tension oozing into the interview room, I sat in front of those three people. The sun was blinding, somebody had to stand up and close the curtains so we could see. The curtains made a strange long squeak, and it got quiet again, my mouth dried, I could not bring myself to reach for the glass of water on the table. I knew my voice would tremble when I first spoke, and there was no way I could fix it seconds before the execution. The questions pierced me like sniper bullets: unexpected, injuring permanently the very core of my young and fragile self-confidence. Who is the leader of the opposition? What is, in your opinion, the best political move of the ruling majority in the last six months? Name the fastest growing economy in the world. I had no clue. That was not my world. My world was built from and somehow within the lines, ideas and ideals of Joyce, Tolstoy, Camus, Abe, Remarque, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Hesse and many others, I found in my mother's neat bookshelves at home, and my world, unfortunately, was not real, it was not valid, it simply did not hold the answers I needed that day, if, in fact, it held any answers I would ever need, and in that room 10:15 in the morning, nobody cared about it as nobody cared about my collection of creative writing awards. It was marked somewhere across my name, "unaware", and the demolition of my hopes was completed heartlessly with the final interview score of an eight.

What followed was two years of Norwegian language studies, my second choice on the study programme list, coming in before Political Science and Philosophy. I never thought I would have to settle for my second choice, for something that would not be related to writing. So I hated it, I was indifferent. I was so severely injured during that interview, that anything I did no longer make

any sense. I struggled through Latin, Scandinavian history, and Norwegian language lectures, and only ever really half-enthusiastically attended Ancient Literature and Great Western Literature. I did not want to do it. The time I did not spend embracing the joys of student life in the Lithuanian capital, I spent reading and writing short stories on a young writer's website. In the end of the second year at the University, I started failing my exams. Then I told my parents I wanted to quit.

- That is a good thing about being in Siberia, even about being on this train, - you cannot quit.

Somebody told me this on the Trans-Siberian train; I can hear the words but cannot remember the face of the person who told me this. On the Trans-Siberian train you often conversed with people without looking at them, at their faces, you would look outside instead, allowing your gaze to wander, you would look at the taiga rolling in front of your eyes, and you would hear them half dreaming, and therefore a lot of conversations that happen on that train are not attached to humans, only to the place, to the land – to Siberia. I thought about being unable to *quit* a land like Siberia, unable to leave and settle somewhere else, to have no need to, to truly belong wholeheartedly to one place – it is something I have never experienced. I explore this a little bit in the *About the Community* chapter of this thesis, this notion of belonging and not belonging. And I am meant to find that everybody needs to belong, but here, some of us and all of us to some extent, can only belong to the landscapes within, those made up of memories and imaginations, of places and people that touched us through our dwelling in time in a semi-complete solitude of our minds: those landscapes, which are inaccessible to others, unless, like in my case here, we willingly open them for exploration. Those, just like, I was told, Siberia, we

cannot quit. Wherever we go, they come with us. Whatever we become, the ones we treasure most seem to stay with us also. Here I remember my neighbour's mother, her slender figure, ghostly, with very pale, incredibly smooth skinned face and small blue eyes wandering around in the young gardens that surrounded our homes in the mid-1990s. She would always wear a long flannel gown with a tightly done up belt, which made it look like she could break into two easily like a thin piece of transparent ice if just touched. I remember her for some reason in a faded pink peacock printed one, coming up to us slowly, completely lost in the path she was following, stopping a few steps away – her sight crystal blue, empty and frightening almost – and asking the way to *Dalgai*, her home village. With the innocent cruelty, only children can possess we used to send her to the other side of the garden, assuring her with mischievous smiles that *Dalgai*, and her mother and brothers, are waiting for her there to celebrate her return. It hurts me now, when I think about her, an unpleasant reminder of old age in our neighbourhood where nobody's hair yet bore a touch of grey, her endless journeys back home, to the landscape so profoundly rooted in her mind that even dementia could not take the clarity of its image away. Her picture in my mind is also very deeply set and vivid, and it is only years later that I can finally come to appreciate its impact. And here I write about my neighbour's mother in my introduction chapter, because through the process of writing this work, as I came closer to the end of it especially, I started to realise that my journey through Siberia was not so different from her delirious wandering in my childhood's gardens.

Back to quitting: in 2005, my parents allowed me to stop my studies. Almost as easily as they allowed me to quit the piano ten years earlier and many other projects I embarked upon. There always was only one condition with them: I

had to go and do something else. I was never to stop looking, and if needs be, starting again. I was not allowed to stop. A year later, after Cultural Management studies, I went to the UK for a few weeks. Here I decided to quit. Again. The only way I could convince my parents I had to stay in the UK was to enrol into a local University. And I did, almost by chance; I became a BSc Tourism Management and then MSc Tourism and Hospitality student at the University of Sunderland. These studies required so little effort compared to my previous University courses in Lithuania that I flew through them, graduating at the very top of my class. I learned very little. Or perhaps, the information I acquired I did not really need, I did not welcome it – it just did not fit my inner landscape. I started looking for something that was closer to me when I took up my Masters. Looking into backpackers who take the Trans-Siberian for my dissertation was my attempt to avoid the boredom of dealing with statistics, with well-structured factual texts I struggled to read and I struggled to write. Siberia was my escape. My Master's thesis explored the Trans-Siberian travellers and their motivations, it is quite striking, and I am only capable of identifying this now – they all, these young backpackers, full of life and hunger for more of the unsliced authentic, had this quite inspired way of telling their journeys, it was almost like Siberia spoke through them about its own vastness and greatness, like they were all possessed by some creative spirit they encountered on the train taking them through the taiga. *There was something about this land.* But I already knew that there was always something about this land for me, and I carried that knowledge within me as I carry the taste of those childhood pine nuts on my palate. I write about this in my *Methodology and Research Approach* chapter, about what happens to you in Siberia, or perhaps in any place of cold and solitude, where, as Glenn Gould (1987) tells us, you “become

at least aware of the creative opportunity which the physical fact of the country represents and—quite often, I think—come to measure your own work and life against that rather staggering creative possibility” (p.392).

Drawing upon the context of writing this work, I think it is important to mention that my grandmother died when I was just about to start writing this thesis, on my return from Siberia. I cannot help but think that her death has influenced the way things were perceived, remembered and written in this work. With the death of my grandmother, I felt the loss not only of her, but also the loss of the memories, all the stories that were connected with her, and which contributed to my own sense of identity. It was a long and tiring fight against cancer that took her away. Last time I saw her, her long white hair, which she always wore in a bun, was cut really short, she sat on the sofa in my parents' house as beautiful as ever, looking at me so that I can still feel that look wrapped around me. It was a sunny autumn's afternoon, the room was filled with the warm sadness of the Indian summer, and I longed for her to speak, as she used to, in her effortlessly strict but pleasant manner, the dialect of Lithuanian only she could make sound bearable, but she did not. It was the silence I will remember forever, silence that bore within itself the tension between life, death and living all equally present, the kind of silence I also found when travelling through Siberia, when gazing at the taiga rolling in front of my eyes: the silence of the eternal - unendurable yet familiar somehow. It is the last memory of my grandmother I have, I never attended her funeral, I wasn't there for her last weeks, and my mother told me it is better, it is better for me that I did not, because I am blessed with remembering her alive and well. Death is not beautiful, she said. Death is so simple, I knew, I have seen death once from up close. Our dog of seven years, a large brown taxhund died in a hall of our

house, with me, my mother and my younger brother watching. He was laid down on a round colourful mat, which my father wrapped him into later when we buried him in our garden under the young shrub of the apple tree, his back legs tensed in three or four short convulsions, he let out a strange almost human sigh from somewhere deep in his lungs, and then vomited and peed over himself and that was it. I just stood there unable to move or speak and looked at my mother and younger brother, who burst into tears immediately in shock and disbelief. All I could see at that moment was the day when we first got him, a tiny puppy, the only brown one among his black brothers and sisters, how I picked him up and how he fitted perfectly into the palm of my hand and how I put my face closer to smell him as if he was a baby. He had long lashes and his nose, black, cold and wet, was touching the skin around my wrist and sniffing it carefully. I remembered the utter complete happiness of that moment. I cried then standing in the hall with my mother and brother, not because he died, but because I was overwhelmed to tears by the intensity and vividness of that memory, that moment in the past which I did not know existed somewhere in my head and which signified the strength of my relationship with the dog, and now the greatness of this loss. After a few minutes of my brother sobbing uncontrollably I managed to calm myself down and asked my mother if people die the same way. She looked at me and replied in a soothing calm voice as if she was not affected by the whole event we have just witnessed, and that was how my mother replied to a lot of our questions, reminding me of our priest during Sunday Mass, she said yes, my darling, people die in exactly the same way, it is how we live and how we become that makes us different. Here, finally, to some extent at least, this work tries to answer that "how we become" which



has always troubled me, and becomes in some way also an attempt to cope with the loss; this thesis is probably one of the forms of mourning.

Lately the inquiries of personal, social or cultural memory have become a major field of interest throughout the humanities and social sciences. Memory is no longer a mere concern of psychology, the study of memory now extends to anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, communication, history and, increasingly, to geography (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004). The relationship between geography and memory has not been fully explored yet, and the ways memory shapes our “on going becoming” is still a matter of mystery (Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012: 1). My thesis is a strange and nostalgic journey, not really through Siberia, but through my own mind. Here I have narrated a wandering, a tale, but not a random one, rather a purposeful series of mediations inspired by memory, history, books I have read, the views upon Siberia and people I have met on my way. Simply, I told a story. Stories. I narrated myself into the landscape of Siberia. Many of the stories I told were about loss and passing of time, and all of them were about people. The beauty of the experience of writing stories is that your mind wanders off on its own, somewhere into the past, into the memory, into the dream, into the imagining perhaps, and then, suddenly you come back, return to the page where it all has been written in a strange moment of absence and realise that you are in a different place, a different moment and not ever quite sure how you got there. But then it also inevitably gives you the feeling that you owe your whole existence in the world, places you inhabit, people, words, memories, dreams and imaginings all of which you can use to expand, to almost narrate yourself into being. Then you look at your writing from outside as a stranger, as a guest; there at some point of being immersed in your writing a feeling emerges that

there are two of you present: you yourself and you – the narrator. It is a separation, and, without a doubt, it is I, the narrator, who is to blame for the fact that this thesis has such a dreamy presence, of which memory is at the centre.

Geographers, according to Cameron (2012), are reworking the concept of story “as part of a relational and material turn within the discipline, as part of a renewed focus on the political possibilities afforded by storytelling, and as a mode of expressing non-representational, (post)phenomenological geographies” (p. 573). Thrift (2008) argues that the emergence of creative geographies is one of the outcomes of an expanding body of non-representational theory that advocates embodied experience and direct and primary witnessing of the world around us that requires new modes of representation. Human geographers are increasingly engaging and understanding the world around us through the creative arts and humanities (Hawkins, 2014). They are publishing poetry (de Leeuw 2015, Cresswell 2013), and exploring music, art and literature as means of thinking through geographic inquiries. Creativity within the discipline of human geography is now a dimension of thinking, learning and expressing. One can claim that lately creativity, memory and place are connected and reworked to produce a large proportion of the context for modern identities. My thesis is based on creative story telling which I believe helped me to bring out a very personalised picture of Siberia, transform it from being a gigantic land, distant unknown territory into a means enabling be to talk meaningfully about solitude, creativity, memories and selfhood. Telling stories through reliving and reimagining personal memories my thesis conjures a variety of ideas and focuses on how place can be interpreted, experienced, and created.

Stories, as opposed to narratives, are defined as heterogeneous assemblages of various practices, memories and materialities (Lorimer, 2003). A story is more than just a text about something or someone; Haraway (2008) argues that when we are touched by a story we “inherit” different relations and begin to “live” different “histories” (2008:37). Benjamin (2002) writes about the role of the storyteller in the modern world, which is in part a study of the delight of the imagining, the opening, and the gathering allowed by stories. Benjamin (2002) argues that storytelling is a human practice, evolved through years of living, working and traveling, and the art of the storytelling is to keep it free from explanation: “most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves amplitude that information lack”(p. 4).

Maynes *et al* (2008) argue that personal stories are never only just individual creations, these stories are told within certain times and places and “draw on the rules and models and other narratives in circulation that govern how story elements link together in a temporal logic”(p. 4) What I needed and what I utilised in writing this thesis, is what de Leeuw *et al* (2017) describes as an “unscripted and open-minded methodological approach”, which avoids “comfort, predictability, or neat-and-tidy closure, privileging instead a mode of inquiry and co-creation of knowledge that is emotionally resonant, connected, grounded, flexible, creative, and untethered from the constraints of time or schedule” . How does one puts space, place, memory, imagination, time and movement together, how does one comprehend them? I found a concept of “deep mapping”, as an approach to place, which has been deployed as “both a descriptor of a specific suite of creative works and as a set of aesthetic

practices” (Springett, 2015: 623), echoing with my approach to writing this thesis about Siberia. Places we move through, places we inhabit and we ourselves are saturated with stories, to engage with these stories we use, as Springett (2015) suggests, deep mapping as a methodology enabling “to democratize knowledge through the crossing of temporal, spatial, and disciplinary boundaries”(p.624). Bailey and Biggs (2012) describe deep mapping as “observing, listening, walking, conversing, writing and exchanging<...> selecting, reflecting, naming, and generating<...> digitizing, interweaving, offering and inviting” (p. 326). According to Harris (2015), deep mapping is a way to see “deep contingency and the rippling of place based events across time and space” (p. 188). Deep maps are narrative based and incorporate autobiography, they offer a way, according to Bodenhamer *et al* (2014), to integrate multiple voices, views and memories and provide an opportunity for “open, unique postmodern scholarship that embraces multiplicity, simultaneity, complexity and subjectivity” (p. 5) For me going deep when writing about Siberia and my train journey through its enormous landscape turned out to be going towards myself, towards what Siberia meant to me and the ones around me, going deep was going into my own memory and memories of others, and might it not be, as Sebald’s (2011) Austerlitz beautifully put, “that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time <...>?” (p.143)

Jones and Garde-Hansen (2014) suggest that identities of places are continuously being negotiated within a complex interplay between the settled and remembered past and the new moments of present events. Jones (2011)

further argues that our lives are not “merely present relations between body and current space, but a fantastically complex entanglement of self, past spatial relations and memory in current life”(p. 7). In his work Terdiman (2009) explains how journeys to Isle of Skye and Poland triggered associations with other places in his memory, and compares one’s mind to a web search engine able to produce an endless amount of associational leads or take one anywhere in a split of a second. For him memory, apart from being a tool of conservation, also is "a register of displacement, mutation and transformation", acting as a medium of our experiences of difference (p. 187). In some way, memory is a mechanism enabling us to cope with the present, with the sense of discomfort that we feel sometimes when confronted with alien landscapes or strange people. My memory, the stories I told going back to my childhood memories, enabled me to cope with a huge task of narrating Siberia, it enabled a whole new approach, a totally new construction – and so a completely different journey.

I realized that I would have to turn to telling my own memory at the time when I had halved the first chapter of my thesis About the Community and sat down to write the description of being in the carriage on the train somewhere in the middle of Siberia. The experience of the landscape was so ungraspable, so indefinable and unknown, that I had to look for some form of representation, which would enable me to write about it, to write about something, which felt at the time to be almost materially impossible, almost beyond comprehension. In order to understand that landscape, and perhaps more importantly to relate to it, I needed to bring it closer to myself; the real, physical journey through Siberia had to become a metaphorical journey through place and time, in which my own memory played an important meaning constructing part. Jones (2011) argues, that creativity, potential and depth emerges not from the moment *per se*, but

from the legacy of our past, which we carry into the present through memories. Siberian landscape and my experiences on the train serve as jumping off points for meditations on my own memories becoming a line of stories, chains of association, and dwellings on my internal impressions. Hacking (1998) writes, that new meanings change the past. The past, he argues, “becomes filled with new actions, new intentions, new events that caused us to be as we are”, and so by reworking our memories we are making up ourselves (p. 6). Connections from one topic to the next in my thesis are no more obvious than the impressions moving through any mind not engaged in a particular task – it is dreamlike. And truly, it felt that while writing this thesis I was not engaged in any particular task, maybe because writing this just as the very process of remembering itself was non-linear, complex and in some ways multidimensional, at the same time it felt like I am looking at the encounters with people, Siberian landscape and my memories under the microscope and connecting threads in order to make meaning, to create a meaningful narrative. Therefore it is probably right to say that in this particular thesis memories were reworked and became thoughts, ways of expressing, meaning creating vehicles. As Baxandall (2010) puts it, memories are not often about oneself directly, instead they are memories of “what one perceived or felt: footprints of the self. Identity is distributed through memory, not simply represented”(p. 21).

When I started my PhD at the University of Exeter in October 2010, I had a very clear vision of the thesis. I will go to Siberia, and I will get inspired the way all these backpackers I interviewed were inspired before me. I will write about the people, about the rhythm of the train, the rhythm of the bodies - my own body, about the community, the familiar and the other, and the landscape. I will interview, I will observe, I will document my journey in photographs. But the real

journey began when I started writing about my Trans-Siberian, chapter by chapter more daringly as it all went those lines started containing more than the Trans-Siberian journey I completed. And all I had to do was to embrace it, in fact, I was encouraged to embrace it and so the text, which is still ahead of you, became telling a story, telling stories in a very similar fashion as I do in this introduction, with a hum of Siberian taiga and journeying through Siberia on a train somewhere in the background. I thoroughly enjoyed writing this text, because finally, after all, these years I did what I always wanted to do: I was writing, and more importantly even, I was given a freedom to write the way I best could within a discipline that had the capacity but not an intention to limit, to restrict it. Trying to think once again how my thesis contributes to the body of research in contemporary human geography, I imagine that it will probably find itself among those works concerned with how the personal, when embraced, enters and alters the research, how it contributes and how it perhaps takes away, touching on the ever-probed question of representation in human geography. The geography I have written here is about the inevitable mobility of the mind, which sees us losing the ability to stay fastened to physical spaces, images and our own being, and opening the possibility to travel in time, space and memory. The physical landscape, landscape of Siberia that I set out to write about when I started, becomes almost invisible, disappears and re-emerges as a series of personal images and stories, feelings and dreams, suggesting that even moving through the vastest landscapes in the world we are always travelling inward, towards an understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Memory and imagination are always at work, and trying to grasp them writing them down I often found myself lost at the end of very long oddly constructed sentences the beginning of which I would have forgotten

already. And that can be said about the whole thesis. I have travelled a long way from my first chapter *About Community*, where the physical of Siberia, Trans-Siberian train carriage, people and myself are the most present, until the last one *About Landscape*, which enjoys imaginative telling and journeying through the inner landscapes of memory, dreams and imagination. I wish I could say that all my chapters flow into each other smoothly and constitute a united textual and cognitive perspective, but they do not. As I explain in my *Methodology and Research Approach* chapter my thesis resembles most an autoethnography written through the episodes of the encounters and experiences on the Trans-Siberian railway journey, which becomes an invisible backbone for the personal narratives and the stories of the others, which intertwining reveal in more depth the complex relationship between the self and the world, the present and the absent, and the imagined. It is really difficult to map out this work because none of my chapters has a very particular focus or conclusion, it is almost like each of them is sifting out the endless nuances of images, sounds, emotions and impressions encountered on the journey. Finally, I ask a lot from my reader, I have actually almost written this for a particular reader, who I thought would be open to engaging in this work without thinking about the theoretical background, but discovering various nuances of feeling, open to the words, the sentences, the descriptions of journeying through Siberian and inner landscapes in which that feeling resides.





# SIBERIA AND THE HISTORY OF THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY

## The Mammoths

*“Scientists estimate that the Siberian permafrost holds the remains of 150 million mammoths—or about 8 million more than the 142 million Russians aboveground in Russia today.”*

(Ian Frazier, Travels in Siberia)

I chose the above quote to start my chapter on Trans-Siberian history because it made me think about Siberia as of a gigantic grave of the past, the holder of its fascinating, unknown and its mystic, it made me think of Siberia as of the land where the past will not, simply cannot ever be overwhelmed by the present. They strangely coexist here. The quote also reminded me of a Russian cartoon that made me cry every time I watched it as a child - *Мама для мамонтенка (Mother for a little Mammoth)*, a story about how one day *far far up North* a little mammoth suddenly wakes up and cannot find his mother: animals like her, as he is told by the *grandpa seal* as the story continues, had lived there *long long ago* but *had gone away* now. I watched this and many other Soviet cartoons when a lot of the television was still in Russian in Lithuania, I was round 5 or 6 then. There was a half an hour for children every night at 8:30 PM, a programme called *Goodnight, Children*. While waiting impatiently for it to start I used to imagine, that every child, and not only the children of the neighbourhood but thousands of children all over the country are

now seated in their living rooms, the rooms very similar to the one in our house, in front of TV sets illuminated by the blue shine coming from the screens just like me, and some of them had freckles just like me and just like mine their parents were telling them to keep their distance from the TV: it was probably the only time I felt a part of a community – through that vividly imagined sight of all of us watching a cartoon at 8:30 PM every night. And, in fact, as we had no choice and the cartoons only came on once a day at 8:30 PM, my imagined act of communal cartoon watching was not that far from the reality. Today I can still think about all of us who grew up with the Soviet cartoon at 8:30 PM as a community, community which inhabited through the incredible Soviet animation – cartoons like *Hedgehog in the Fog*, a ten minute cartoon which took the genius of Yuriy Norshteyn two years to create – a sense of depth, a sense of meaning and so subsequently a need for meaning, almost a craving for meaning. These cartoons, this sincere, truthful, simple but overwhelmingly beautiful animation, which always carried an encrypted message, I believe, left every single one of us inspired and we, children of Soviet animation knew all too well that stories do not always have happy endings, that heroes also die and that all forms of beauty and joy just as well as those of sadness and despair do not last forever – are not meant to last forever. What Soviet animation told us was the truth about the work of living through the beautifully drawn and told stories on our TV screens. Little Mammoth from the cartoon did not find his mother, mammoths – I already knew then – are extinct. Us, the generation, which grew up with the once a day hand drawn cartoons, will also be gone one day. Will we be forgotten, or will the memory and fascination with us, those who disappeared – just like mammoths – because some big change happened and the world suddenly transformed beyond recognition, will be

carried throughout the generations? What does it take to be remembered? And like Sebald's (2011) *Austerlitz* I wonder more and more often as I grow older about how little we can hold in mind, "how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power or memory is never heard, never described or passed on."(pp. 30-31).

When I started writing this chapter about the history of the railway, I wished it was something I could remember myself, like those cartoons or, the collapse of Soviet Union, and this wish never abandoned me, in fact, throughout the whole of this work it became increasingly almost an obsession to tell the histories of others as the ones my own, as a part of my own at least, and because of the way memory and imagination works, it was never an impossible task. So finally, this is the chapter about how the Trans-Siberian railway was built and then rebuilt, it is about the people who built it and people who travelled on it through Siberia but it is also about my connection with various episodes from that history, even though that connection is as fragile as that between a Siberian mammoth and a Soviet cartoon.

## **About Siberia**

Before starting to talk about the history of the train, I need to introduce you to Siberia. And that is not an easy ask, for me especially. To provide a clear picture of Siberia, I have to move away now from Siberia as I see it, a land that invaded my head and became a sort of orchestrating feeling. Siberia to me is essentially something immaterial, transcending the borders of its enormous

physical presence. And Siberia is not this to everyone, in fact, Siberia as a feeling can only be met in the lines of the travel writing of Theroux or Corbin, and sometimes in the backpackers blogs. It is, after all, a staggering landmass. Its written appearances I came across while reading is almost all about its huge material body, the land: its natural resources, flora and fauna, problems commuting and transporting across it, calls to preserve its wild beauty. Siberia has hundreds of faces, and each one is interesting for different fields of research. The easiest and probably the only way for me to present those different Siberias, I found, was to simply put long quotes from the papers/websites that represent them. So here, you can meet the Siberias that I did not write about, but which are as fascinating as mine.

You will find this Siberia everywhere: backpacker websites, travel journals, adverts, and encyclopaedias. It is factual Siberia, Siberia as a land, mostly expressed in numbers, boasting superlatives of largest, biggest, oldest, furthest, coldest. Trans-Siberian train is almost always present in these factual accounts; it is after all, now one of the most fascinating objects in this landscape. This Siberia is always the first Siberia you meet when you look for it, factual Siberia is always at the start of your relationship with it: imposing thirteen million square kilometres of land stretching through seven time zones.

*“All but the extreme southwestern area of Siberia lies in Russia. In Russian usage, the administrative areas on the eastern flank of the Urals, along the Pacific seaboard, and within Kazakhstan are excluded from Siberia. The total area of Siberia in the wider sense is about 5,207,900 square miles (13,488,500 square km); in the narrower Russian definition, the area is 2,529,000 square miles (6,550,000 square km), consisting of two economic planning regions,*

*Eastern and Western Siberia. Siberia also contains the (Russian) republics of Sakha (Yakutia), Buryatia, and Tyva (Tuva).*

*Siberia falls into four major geographic regions, all of the great extents. In the west, abutting the Ural Mountains is the huge West Siberian Plain, drained by the Ob and Yenisey rivers, varying little in relief, and containing wide tracts of swampland. East of the Yenisey River is central Siberia, a vast area that consists mainly of plains and the Central Siberian Plateau. Farther east the basin of the Lena River separates central Siberia from the complex series of mountain ranges, upland massifs, and intervening basins that make up northeastern Siberia (i.e., the Russian Far East). The smallest of the four regions is the Baikal area, which is centred on Lake Baikal in the south-central part of Siberia.*

*Siberia, its name derived from the Tatar term for “sleeping land,” is notorious for the length and severity of its almost snowless winters: in Sakha, minimum temperatures of  $-90^{\circ}\text{F}$  ( $-68^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) have been recorded. The climate becomes increasingly harsh eastward, while precipitation also diminishes. Major vegetation zones extend east-west across the whole area—tundra in the north; swampy forest, or taiga, over most of Siberia; and forest-steppe and steppe in southwestern Siberia and the intermontane basins of the south.*

*The mineral resources of Siberia are enormous; particularly notable are its deposits of coal, petroleum, natural gas, diamonds, iron ore, and gold. Both mining and manufacturing underwent rapid development in Siberia in the second half of the 20th century, and steel, aluminium, and machinery are now among the chief products. Agriculture is confined to a more southerly portions of*

*Siberia and produces wheat, rye, oats, and sunflowers.* (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015)

For many, Siberia only exists as a transit land – an obstacle, if you like, a land, which has to be crossed to transport goods or people from one side of the world to another. Siberia represents here an important connection between point A and B of trading parties; various research projects investigate how to cross it cheaper, faster, causing minimal harm to the environment. And here one more Siberia emerges, Siberia as a logistical burden in the world of trade with Trans-Siberian railway often at the hear of it:

*“TSR (Trans-Siberian Railway) route is losing price competitiveness versus Deep Sea route in the transportation from East Asia to Europe, including Moscow. To further attracting the containers to the TSR route, it will be necessary (1) to keep competitive through rate, linked to fluctuating Deep Sea rate; (2) to strengthen speed advantage; (3) to enforce seamless transportation system, including simplified customs clearance procedures. In transportation to Central Asia from East Asia (Korea and Japan), TSR is competitive versus TCR (Trans-China Railway), depending on destinations. Korea has been the leader in revitalising the TSR route since 2000. Key contributors were affluent export containers to Russia and Central Asia, port of Busan, efficient maritime transport network to Far East Russia, and Korean forwarders' persistent efforts for activating the market. Korea and Japan have a possibility of cooperation in using the TSR route efficiently, such as organising a joint block train to the same destination (Tsuji, 2013:139).*

The most often encountered presence of written Siberia possibly is that of Siberia as a natural treasure. Here another Siberia emerges with its forests and

lakes, flora and fauna, with its stunning ability to preserve and recover, to hold within itself the diversity, the depth and rare fascinations of the biological world:

*“Lake Baikal—the world's largest, oldest, and most biotically diverse lake—is responding strongly to climate change, according to recent analyses of water temperature and ice cover. By the end of this century, the climate of the Baikal region will be warmer and wetter, particularly in winter. As the climate changes, ice cover and transparency, water temperature, wind dynamics and mixing, and nutrient levels are the key abiotic variables that will shift, thus eliciting many biotic responses. Among the abiotic variables, changes in ice cover will quite likely alter food-web structure and function most because of the diverse ways in which ice affects the lake's dominant primary producers (endemic diatoms), the top predator (the world's only freshwater seal), and other abiotic variables. Melting permafrost will probably exacerbate the effects of additional anthropogenic stressors (industrial pollution and cultural eutrophication) and could greatly affect ecosystem functioning. Lake Baikal is a treasure trove for biologists. In part because of its great antiquity (it is approximately 25 million years old) and its deep, oxygenated water, this lake harbours more species than any other lake in the world, and many of them are endemic (Martin 1994). More than half of the approximately 2500 animal species (Timoshkin 1995) and 30% of the 1000 plant species are endemic (Bondarenko et al. 2006a); 40% of the lake's species are still undescribed (Timoshkin 1995). The presence of oxygen down to its deepest depths (1642 m), a trait shared with the ocean but unique among deep lakes (> 800 m), explains the presence of multicellular life and the evolution of an extensive, mostly endemic fauna in the lake's profundal depths” (Moore et al, 2009:405).*

To me Siberia I travelled through is none of the Siberias described above.





**Figure 1. Nenet children eating raw deer meat and drinking blood. Available at: [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=76c\\_1427100487](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=76c_1427100487)**

Look at this picture of Inuit, one of the oldest Siberian tribes, children feasting on a deer. Powerful, isn't it? You want to go back and look at it again. Stare at it for a while, perhaps, pick up on small details, unsure if it fascinates you or puts you off. This picture represents Siberia to me; this is the real Siberia. This Siberia is about the powerful feeling of otherness, captivating immaterial distance between you and the land, and those and that within the land. And yet looking at those children, their bloody hands and strange primitive happiness that comes with being able to satisfy hunger, one of the core needs of a human being, you feel almost involuntary that you have got something in common with them, something which runs deep under the layers of modernity you are comforting yourself in, and that is what fascinates you the most. Siberia to me is about otherness that evokes something in you – what? It does not matter, not really, as it is cannot be measured and would not be expressed in any of the

ways you would expect or would like it to, it is not going to manifest in any particular form, or perhaps will not manifest at all, but remain there, within you.

The very word Siberia feels to be immaterial, extending beyond its geographical dimensions into something conceptual like cold, darkness, mystery and distance. One can go on and on, and deeper: loneliness, cruelty, fear. Siberia (Sib Ir), "sleeping land" in Mongolian, suggests that to the ones who first inhabited it and named it that land seemed to be quiet, harmless, but not welcoming, rather – indifferent. And regardless of what we know about its geographical extent, natural entities and inhabitants now it remains, in some respect, beyond the border of what can be known, of what can be explored, touched, seen and confirmed beyond a reasonable doubt, it remains a land the edges of which cannot be reached – almost like those of a dream.

For the early explorers and thinkers, Siberia was a dreamland in a real sense of the world, the land inspiring the birth of numerous myths. In the V century, B.C. Herodotus wrote about the lands presumably lying at the bottom of the Ural Mountains populated with strange, fantastic creatures. He calls the land Hyperborea and the inhabitants of the land Hyperboreans and so the myth is born. Classicists questioned Herodotus as a reliable source, yet they turned back to him when talking about distant nations living in the far North (Tomaskova, 2013: 182). The land, which nurtured those who could survive and prospered in the place beyond the cold and death in the eternal sunshine and never ending happiness beyond the Boreal wind, was fascinating. Hyperboreans, the mythical people of the great North, the inhabitants of ancient Siberia sustained the interest and curiosity for ages. The enchantment with the north, with its unreachable people, is reflected in the writing of the classic poets. Pindar gave up the hope of ever finding Hyperboreans and so they have

become a beautiful symbol of inaccessible perfection of being: "Neither by sea nor by travelling by land canst you discover the wondrous path to the assembly of Hyperboreans <...> and in their habits the muse is not an alien from this nation <...> and neither disease nor destructive old age approaches the sacred race; but apart from toils and battles they dwell <...>" (Pindar c. 522-433 BC in Jonas, 2013). The Hyperboreans, the people occupying magic places beyond the Ural Mountains, played a starring role when classical scholars engaged in discussions of art and religion, connections between art and magic (Tomaskova, 2013).

The influence of mythical Hyperboreans lingered. Even when the image of the real well-documented shaman replaced the myths and removed the name of Hyperboreans from archaeological texts in the mid-twentieth century, the idea of the North and the utopian life in there remained alive. It was perceived as a source, an idea of eternal happiness, a way of life. Nietzsche (2015) uses Pindar's account of Hyperboreans in his philosophical attempt to describe a new type of man; he introduces the mythical past in the first paragraph of his *Antichrist* connecting it with the present by saying "Let us look each other in the face. We are Hyperboreans – we know well enough how remote our place is" (p. 19). Nietzsche's (2015) Hyperboreans live in the modernity yet they do not belong here because, as he further explains "<...>This is the sort of modernity that made us ill – we sickened on lazy peace, cowardly compromise, the whole virtuous dirtiness of the modern Yea and Nay. This tolerance and largeness of the heart that "forgives" everything because it "understands" everything is a sirocco to us. Rather live amid the ice than among modern virtues and other such south-winds! . ." (p. 19) Ultimately, Nietzsche (2015) identifies happiness with power, a power that modern man lacks. Hyperboreans of the North possessed

that power; they “have found the exit out of the labyrinth of thousands of years” (p.19) and Nietzsche (2015) suggests that philosophical happiness, which overcomes nihilism, can be reached through Hyperborean solitude, in fact, Nietzsche claims, that he has arrived at their impossible place.

Siberia is ultimately one of those impossible, indescribable places that cannot be found and reached by simply knowing their geographical coordinates. And the pull of Siberia today as well as thousands of years ago to those, who were not able to physically reach it, is the fascinating unknown beyond the North Wind. The lure of it is what this serene land offers: when wandering on the outskirts of various comfort zones it provides the opportunity to exit the labyrinth of one's own mind.

The Trans-Siberian railway made that opportunity accessible.

### **The Dream of Greatness**

How does one write the history of the train? By writing the history of the people who built it and those who before building it imagined it, dreamed about it, writing the history of the people who travelled and travel on these rails and different Siberia they reach and discover, they remember and write about. Telling the story of the train is writing the history of the land and its people, which was changed forever by its existence and at the very same time remained unchanged in its essence despite the notorious human attempt to conquer its body. I have always found that for me the most effective way to look at and connect with recent histories is finding them in those few fragile moments of past captured – pictures. The monochrome of it often holds the moment of

the past so pure and vibrant that you can feel the heaviness of the story behind. While writing this chapter I went through hundreds of pictures and they become my tool to transform the stream of dates and numbers into something more personal, closer to those who I believe are at the essence of what Trans-Siberian train is today: the people who built it and people, and stories of those people, who crossed the land by it. So here, the picture below captured the railway builders at the unknown location in Krasnoyarsk region in 1898:



**Figure 2** A group of Trans-Siberian workmen at the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway (1898) Available at: <http://www.transsib.ru/Photo/Old/old-237.jpg>

Looking at the pictures of the Trans-Siberian workers online I found most of them were taken in "unknown location" or "no one knows where". Allowing us to realize the scale of the project and the vastness of the land it was completed in, the difficulties of mapping and tracing within it, these pictures also tell us about those men, thousands and hundreds of thousands of them, who were working "no one knows where", laying the rails of somebody's notorious idea with their bare hands, mostly prisoners and peasants, unshaved, dressed in rags living in

huts made of wood and fur in cool summers and harsh winters. Still, in this picture, in their faces, I can see and sense pride: the way they hold their heads and shoulders, the position of their hands tells me these men were proud of what they were doing. And so the picture, taken in times when photography was still a touch of luxury in Russia, tells me a story of proud forgotten men, Trans-Siberian Railway Builders, nameless and sacrificed for a dream of greatness, Russia's never ending the dream of expansion and prosperity; the men whose remains just like those of the mammoths, are held by the Siberian permafrost. The undocumented loss of these men proves how little love Russia has always had to spare for its simple people, who composed and compose still the majority of its population. And yet the population would work restlessly, starve and die for the idea of the greatness of the nation. The story of Trans-Siberian is inevitably also a story of mass sacrifice. Trans-Siberian was born out of Russia's ambition to expand and dominate, the Siberia first and then – the World. The country was humiliated by European great powers in Berlin Congress in 1878, where it was denied its path to Constantinople, therefore left dissatisfied and anxious (Medlicott, 2013). Its focus shifted to Asia entirely, Russia was desperate to regain its power and its pride. Dostoevsky, great Pan Slavist of the time, wrote that Europeans hated Russia and Russia was part of Asia, so it should abandon Europe to its own squabbles and expand its civilising powers and influence to Asia. Building the Trans-Siberian was a way to prove how superior Russian conquering power was. This wish to conquer is echoed in the many blogs of today's Trans-Siberian travellers: a wish to cut through the miles and miles of taiga on the train, to scoop the treasures the unknown land has to offer. Siberia had a lot of material treasures to offer Russia at the end of 19th century. But scooping everything out wasn't easy – Siberia's

treasures were well protected by the harsh environment, endless tundra, widest rivers and worst climate human being can try to survive. First ideas of the railway connecting Siberia to Russia was expressed by the general governor of Eastern Siberia N.N Muravyov-Amursky in 1857, but although extremely exciting and ultimately linking Russia to treasures of the natural resources in Siberia, the project was also very expensive. Unwilling to accept foreign funding Russia struggled to start, but finally, the construction began in 1891. There were a few funding suggestions from foreign entrepreneurs, but the Russian government decided to use its own scarce funds, because of the view that investing capitalists could have strengthened foreign influence in Siberia and the Far East of Russia whilst building the railway there and it was completely unacceptable at the time (Slepven, 1996 in Liliopoulou *et al.*, 2005). The construction began immediately after Tsar Alexander III gave a go ahead in 1891. The construction began from both ends, Vladivostok (East Siberia) and Chelyabinsk (West Siberia), and worked towards the centre.

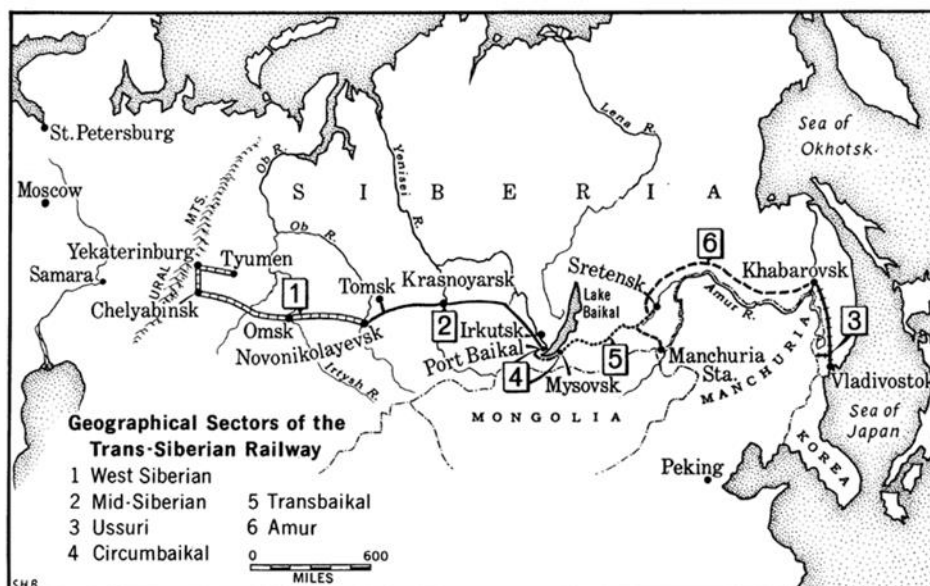


Figure 3 Scheme map of the Great Trans-Siberian Railway (1962) Available at: <http://www.transsib.ru/Map/transsib-building.gif>

It took 25 years to complete at great cost in both rubbles and human lives, as Hudgins (2004) notes, it was built without any heavy machinery, mainly by unskilled labourers equipped with nothing more but picks and wooden shovels. Moreover, a combination of difficult terrain, cheap building materials, corrupt management, poor planning and unskilled workmanship meant that by the turn of the century, a decade of construction, the completed line already needed rebuilding as lines broke, rails buckled and tunnels collapsed (pp. 47). But it was wars, not cheap building materials and unskilled labour that caused the crumbling of the railway.

### **Trans-Siberian during the Wars**

The early 20th century saw Russia exhausted after the civil war. The Russian Civil War was a multi-party war in the former Russian Empire immediately after the Russian Revolutions of 1917, as many factions vied to determine Russia's political future. The war was provoked by a deep financial crisis, losses in the battlefields and the belief in socialistic ideals. The two largest combatant groups were the Red Army, fighting for the Bolshevik form of socialism, and the loosely allied forces known as the White Army, which included diverse interests favouring monarchism, capitalism, and alternative forms of socialism, each with democratic and antidemocratic variants. The civil war has left the Trans-Siberian in a terrible state. Many cars and locomotives were destroyed, many bridges were burnt (Irtysh and Amur bridges) making it up to 800 destroyed



river crossings, and passenger stations suffered a lot. In many places, water supply systems were destroyed. (Wolmar, 2010:222).

During the civil war, Siberia was a dangerous place, and Trans-Siberian railway was one of the ways, in fact, the only way to travel through it, but it was slow, it was frustrating, and it was unsafe. In the memoirs of Canadian Lieutenant Harold Ardagh leading eleven troops from Vladivostok to Omsk for final clearing of Canadian troops, the Trans-Siberian railway journey is chaotic, full of obstacles, delays and dangerous incidents. During their four week journey of a little more than 4000 miles the Canadian troops encountered fire in one of the boxcars loaded with shells and fuses, the disappearance of the locomotive outside Harbin, and an accident during which a Canadian sergeant was run over by a railcar and lost both of his legs (Isitt, 2010: 144), they observed severed telegraph lines, destroyed tracks and burnt railway stations - Trans-Siberian was being destroyed by the very hands of the nation that built it. But that is exactly what I find extraordinary about this nation, it is so careless when it comes to the fruits of its own labour and effort, it is blinded by the strange passion and destroy without consideration the precious years of construction, just to do it again, and again - and again, restlessly, continuously, always with the same pride in the same spirit of the "great nation". This picture of the burnt and collapsed railway bridge over the Irtysh taken in 1919 says it all.



Мост через р. Иртыш, взорванный колчаковцами (1919)

**Figure 4 Bridge over Irtysh blown up at the time of retreat of the White Army near Omsk, 1920 Available at: from <http://www.transsib.ru/Photo/Old/old-11.jpg>**

After more than 25 years of restless construction works Trans-Siberian railway was being destroyed, but then, after the civil war road construction works were immediately organised (Wolmar, 2010:222). The civil war had also left the country's economy in a terrible state; it was short of food resources, and vast areas were hit by famine and extreme poverty. Russia needed to choose either to feed its helpless peasants or restore the destroyed railway. This kind of choice was not difficult: the great nation starved and the Trans-Siberian railway was being rebuilt.

As a war machine, Trans-Siberian railway was important to almost everybody, not only Russia and Russians. The Japanese and Civil wars left Trans-Siberian in a mess. And despite desperate attempts Russia completely lost control over it. Therefore, in 1919 the Inter-Allied Railway Committee (IARC) was

established. It included representatives from governments of the following countries: Russia, United States, Japan, China, Great Britain, France, Italy and Czechoslovakia. Its first task was to divide the railway into sections to be guarded by American, Chinese and Japanese powers. The Technical Board, IARC's board for the technical and economic management of the Trans-Siberian line, between 1919 and 1922 catalysed improvements in both railway's physical condition and its efficiency. Under the Board's direction numerous bridges were repaired or rebuilt, entrances to major tunnels blocked by explosives were cleared, and depots that had been destroyed were replaced: by 1922, when the Allied troops evacuated Siberia and the board ceased to operate, Trans-Siberian railway was reorganised and revitalised (Liliopoulou *et al*, 2005).

After coming to power, Russia's new Soviet rulers were committed to rapid industrial development. They wanted not only to bring railway back to the state it was build, but they did everything that was needed to make Trans-Siberian train a useful propaganda machine which was able to meet prospering Soviet Empire's war needs too.

Furthermore, to make industrialization process possible, they needed to gain wider access to Siberia's plentiful raw materials. In 1929 as part of the first of Stalin's Five-Year Plans – a program of centralised economic measures, including in significant investment in heavy industry, designed to turn USSR into a superpower – the electrification of the Trans-Siberian line began. The regime started to invest: the second track was built alongside the original single line, the light thin rails were replaced with ones more durable, wooden bridges and supports were replaced with iron and steel. Thus working conditions on the railway did not improve much, but in the 1930s Stalin's purges provided plenty

of potential workers for the job - the Siberian forced-labour camps, the gulags, provided numerous discreet and disposable political prisoners who could be persuaded to try their hand at railroad building and tunnel-digging. Taking these measures, even relatively neglected passenger services improved in the 1930s. By 1936 the Moscow Vladivostok journey was eight and a half days, a reduction of seventy two hours in the immediate period after the civil war, and shockingly – only 48h slower than today's fastest trains on fully electrical line.

There's almost no need to mention that the Trans-Siberian railway was used explicitly as a part of Russia's war machine, the railway played a great role in both World Wars. The First World War seen the Trans-Siberian Railway used by the Allied powers to transport troops and supplies across the vast territory. During the Second World War, Trans-Siberian Railway was mainly used for the movement of military supplies delivered from the United States. The end of the Second World War has seen two major changes in the historical development of the Trans-Siberian railway: the Chinese took control over the Trans-Manchurian line, connecting Vladivostok and Siberia (given the name of Chand-Chu'nn Railway) and secondly, Eastern and Central European countries, including Lithuania, were taken under Soviet control, as agreed by the West at the Yalta Conference in 1945 (Liliopoulou et al., 2005). I remember the Second World War from the tales of my grandmother. My grandmother recalled it vividly, the Second World War, she was 8 when it started, and when Lithuania became a land through which both German and Soviet armies moved, destroying the lives and livelihoods of those who were rooted in it. The front moved through my grandmother's village. My grandmother saw her childhood home burnt down twice, in 1941 and 1945. She remembered *the first day of the War*, as she called it: it was July of 1941 and her baby sister was just a few days old when

on the way home from a local town to her village she saw German soldiers lying down in a row in the forest nearby her home, their helmets looked like reversed pots, their faces were dirty and tired and also – they were young and good faces, she thought, when they turned all as one to look at her and she stopped in her tracks breathless as it happened: something was wrong, she felt, and when she was rushed by them to get away, *schneller, schneller*, they shouted and she ran without turning back, she ran back home only to find her house burnt to the ground and her family gone, hiding nearby. They moved sheltered by relatives, and the War stayed in my grandmother's childhood memories as being homeless, being hungry and cold, and afraid, afraid every day and every night, all the time, afraid of being taken to the train and then to Siberia like so many were, afraid when Russian soldiers came and raided her uncle's home for food and took the livestock, afraid when German soldiers came and shot a little Jewish girl her uncle hid in with the dog – they spotted her, she said, when she put her white hand, so white and thin that hand was, out of the dogs house to take a piece of bread thrown to the animal. I can still hear that sentence; it has written itself somewhere deep inside my mind, I can hear it just how my grandmother said it, I do still feel the weight of them, both of her voice and her words. I can remember my grandmother in her living room telling us, her curious grandchildren gathered around her, about the unimaginable cruelties of the War. And perhaps she would not have told us, but we asked and asked, again and again, as if it was not the horrors of her childhood, but some sort of scary fairy tales, something that never really happened but was dreamed out by my grandmother just to entertain us. Reading the history of the Trans-Siberian, even though my imagination is not as naïve and powerful as that one of a child, it also seems to have elements of a fairy tale: inspired by the dream of

greatness, built by thousands of men with their bare hands, cutting through miles of stone, through mountain ridges and bridging the banks of enormously wide rivers in the land of never ending winter. But just like my grandmother's stories, the construction of the Trans-Siberian was real.

The railway had a huge impact on the economic development of the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that it contradicted one the main trade principles of the Soviet Union, in the years to follow the Second World War trade with West Europe flourished. The introduction of containerization in the world market benefited both the shipping and railway sector in the Soviet bloc because it led to the co-operation and co-ordination of these two areas and provided through combined transport, the fastest and cheapest route from the Far East to Western Europe and vice versa. Trans-Siberian remains a crucial part of Russia's export and import transactions. (Liliopoulou et al., 2005). I struggled to find an academic article (there are a few travel guide books) investigating the social – the human side of the Trans-Siberian. There is a lot of information and numerous researches about the economic impact of the railway, lots of numbers and calculations involved. In this context, the fact that perhaps one in a thousand trains going through Siberia carried and today still carries people or one particular person, seems completely unimportant.

## **Elena**

I am going to end the history chapter with another memory from my childhood, one of the brightest and most heart-warming returns. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I feel that I have to write the history of Trans-Siberian,

as I wrote the rest of this thesis – through the memories of those and my own memories of those who had experienced it in a completely different way. Writing the history of the train I have to and I want to write about those who had been taken to Siberia on the very same rails to the unimaginable suffering: to be imprisoned, to live and to perish in its frozen land. Here I find myself here on the darkest page, in the darkest line of Trans-Siberian history long before the railway became a fascination of those like me looking for the untouched beauty of nature and people, searching for solitude and encounter with one's self. This moment in the history of the train I am too inevitably connected. So here I begin, in my grandmother's kitchen, a kitchen which on Sundays became a homely tea place for elderly men and women coming back from the Sunday mass in the white tiny church at the bottom of the village, on Sundays a kitchen in a green wooden house in the very centre of the village buzzed like a human filled hive with laughter and gossip, loud and hushed voices, and smelled of tea and pancakes: my grandmother in the centre of it all like a fairy with her perfectly white hair tight up in a bun, and the bright crystal clear blue eyes which up to now seems were somewhat extraordinary possession for a human being. I used to be woken up by these voices of women and men in my grandmother's kitchen, leave the warmth and softness of my grandmother's bed, run through the cool space of the bedroom towards the door and throw myself right into the bright warm loud space filled with sunshine all the attention suddenly focusing on me as if I came onto a stage to perform a long awaited act; curious voices were asking me how old I was and which of my grandmother's daughters I belonged to. Elena was there every Sunday I stayed over at my grandmother's, resting her back against the huge yellow ceramic stove, dark Slavic style scarf with big deeply red and green flowers around her

shoulders. It seems to me she always wore that scarf, summer or winter, sitting there with a slightly open mouth: a line of pale yellow and one golden tooth visible. I was afraid of her, looking not to touch her or be caught in her sight and at the same time admired the aura of the untouchable, of the strong she carried around effortlessly. She never talked a lot, but there was one odd thing about Elena when she spoke: her voice was incredibly young; it felt like there is a teenager locked up in her stunted old body, that there is a young girl masking herself under the wrinkled face of a 70 year old. This contrast fascinated me as a child, and I watched her mouth and that golden tooth when she spoke almost expecting her to get out of her own body, leave her skin like an uncomfortable plastic costume, like some huge weighty burden, and run out the door 60 years younger. Her voice belonged to the days when she was taken, my grandmother told me, with her parents and older siblings and hundreds of others to Siberia in a cattle carriage of the train. This is one of the most fascinating tales of my childhood and probably one of my first encounters with Siberia. She was the only one of her family who returned and the voice was the only thing which remained with her after 20 years in one of Siberia's prison work camps. And yet she returned defeating the cold and the misery of the life of the Siberian prisoner. Trans-Siberian train, my fascination and my dream, the rhythm of which I found calming and accommodating, the pace which helped me remember, which was soothing and which I found later to be at the centre of my writing, becoming a backbone for my thesis, was the nightmare rhythm of her childhood and adulthood. The picture below is of Polish children on the train from Lugova to Krasnovodsk taken in March of 1942. Children like Elena. And I cannot help but look: from Lugova in Poland to Krasnovodsk in Turkmenistan, they would ride the rails of Trans-Siberian in the darkness of windowless cattle



carriages through the chilly Siberian March. If you do not see where you are going if you do not know where you are taken, and you have no idea what is waiting for you at the end of the journey, what then does your imagination play in your head – and can you still imagine? When you do not sleep and eat, when you are afraid of the moment when the train and its rhythm will finally stop, what are your memories like on board: of the food, of the loved ones? I look at the faces of the girls in the picture, and flash of my own journey runs through my memory: I open the window in the smoking cabin, slide it down and put my head out gasping the cold fresh crispness of Siberian air, the wind catches my hair – I am so happy, I am so free.



**Figure 5 Polish children on the train from Lugova to Krasnovodsk 23rd of March 1942 Available at <http://kresy-siberia.org/galleries/liberation/polish-armed-forces-in-ussr/>**

First Siberian prison camps were set up after the October Revolution in 1917 and since through the mid 1950's and were used by Stalin imprisoning millions of innocent Soviet citizens, criminals and political opponents. The majority of

those deported were landowners, having small family farms. Seen as obstacles implementing Stalin's new political system, they needed to be either exterminated or deported. (Plioplys, 2011:14). On June 14, 1941 at three o'clock in the morning mass arrests and deportations began simultaneously in all of the Baltic States — Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia <...>One after another overfilled convoys moved eastward transporting great masses of people, the major part of whom were fated never to return. The deported were school and high school teachers, university lecturers, lawyers, journalists, the families of Lithuanian military officers, diplomats, various office workers, farmers, agronomists, doctors, businessmen (Grinkeviciute, 1990). Anyone educated or having a profession was a suspect and had to be seriously dealt with (Plioplys, 2011:14). Convicts died on the train, they died in their hundreds on the Trans-Siberian journey before they got to their prison camps “many did not survive the rail journey <...> crammed into the box cars of Trans-Siberian route <...> The journey could take over the month <...> Unable to lie down and sleep, with little water and food, and nothing more than a single bucket in which to relieve themselves, many of the old and weak died before they even arrived. In winter prisoners froze to death, in summer they suffocated” (Rappaport, 199:122-123). The horror of arrival was often, however, worse than the railway journey itself. The sheer horror of encountering Siberia is reflected in the memoirs of Siberia and imprisonment for the first time near Laptev Sea by Dalia Grinkeviciute (1990), the journey to their final destination by rail and water lasted about three months and the shock of arrival she describes here: “We finally stop. In front of us in an uninhabited island. There is nothing. No footsteps, no houses, no yurts, no trees, no bushes or grass—just the icebound tundra eternally frozen and covered with a thin layer of moss <...> They extended a wooden footbridge to

the island's high shore and told us to get out there. Four hundred Lithuanian women, children, elderly people, and a few men. We unloaded boards and bricks out of the barge. Then the steamboat quickly turned around and sailed back because winter was closing in. We were left on an uninhabited island without shelter, without warm clothing, without food, completely unprepared to spend the winter in the Arctic." (1990, no pagination)

The role of prison camps in the development and improvement of Trans-Siberian railway was huge; during his rule Stalin used the pool of free labour to improve the Trans-Siberian railway. The industrial revolution of Siberia and the Trans-Siberian railway as a part of it, the contemporary Trans-Siberian railway, which took me and took many others through Siberia was built on the backs of the imprisoned men, women and children. Elena, the frail old woman with young girl's voice in my grandmother's kitchen, was one of those children. She could remember her journey to Siberia just as well as I do, she had the same memories with thousands of others transported to Siberia on the same route in the box cars of Trans-Siberian. And this dark part of the Trans-Siberian history which today's Russia is shy of, one surviving cell of it was present in my grandmother's kitchen and embedded itself in my memory as the embodiment of strength, miraculous survival, a strange presence of one woman and her victory against destroying powers of Siberia. I will not ever forget her. And the rails, Trans-Siberian rails, impressed on that almost painful vastness of the land, still remember her, they remember all of them. I know, because I have been there: there is a scent of guilt; there is a scent of mourning in the air.



## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

### Context

My son was only one and a half when I started my PhD. His world over the last four years, as well as mine, was spanned and shaped by this work. I remember him sitting down next to me on the sofa in the long evenings of the winter 2011 and going carefully through the mess of my books, and various printed papers, some of them still bear the oily prints of his little fingers. He gradually became obsessed with letters and words at trying to understand the abyss of the lines on the paper that was swallowing me in front of his eyes. The whole of his early childhood was spent sharing me with something ungraspable and immaterial, ghostly, which must have felt like having an invisible brother or sister. For me, it has also been nurturing two children: both battling for attention, each of them making me feel guilty if I spared more time for one of them. They both grew, though, and both in their own way very lonely. At the age of three my son acquired an imaginary friend, it was then that I decided I had to get an extra-large desk so I could accommodate him and his friend next to my computer while I was working. But other than that, I could not bring those two unusual siblings together any closer. They grew in front of my eyes, yet I realise now that in those four years of this strange shared mothership I was never completely present, I was always thinking, dreaming, and worrying about one when I was with another. Or perhaps just thinking, dreaming and worrying. Their relationship, evolved, or they completely drifted apart as sometimes children with a bigger age gap do, and the spaces were eventually divided. He grew out of playing on my working table and his imaginary friendship into being quiet,

obedient, incredibly sensible and sensitive. He learnt to read very early, and I wrote him lots of notes, and letters and bought his books to fill in for, at least partially, the long absences of myself. This work is written on the sheets of time I have stolen from my son, all watermarked with guilt, and apart from the sense of some kind of relief that with the submission I can finally at least for some time allow myself to immerse into motherhood fully, I feel that I have already missed on something which will not ever return, the absence of which will haunt me in the days to come. I do think that my work is full of absences too, and it is just the way it has been written – on the punctured lines of stolen time, sentences disappearing from my head when I finally found a half an hour to write them down, on the thin voices of children screaming in the soft play areas, minutes from working hours in the almost always empty charity office, on the gentle swaying of the bus taking me back from work through dark autumn evenings. This text is not a continuously smooth, organised movement from thought to thought, from chapter to chapter, from the beginning to the conclusion. It is not a product of a planned and well-executed process. This work is in a way a map of the times and places where I wrote pieces of it, a map documenting my movements and stillness, presences and absences over the last four years. The rhythms chapter, for example, is almost exclusively written in the soft plays with some episodes finished in the office at work, while *About the Community* is mostly crafted in the evenings on the bus on the rural route from one village to another, the one on the landscape was written in the space of my tiny study at home. At the same time those pages I had written also represent the times when I was not in those places, I was somewhere else – dreaming, imagining, writing – I was travelling still through Siberia, through taiga, through millions of nuances of feeling and flashes of memory, towards myself.

## **The Idea of Siberia**

When I first listened to Gould's radio Solitude Trilogy's first part on Youtube, *The Idea of North*, I thought, somebody has just put me back on Trans-Siberian, and I am returning into the depth of the taiga through the sounds of clutched train overlaid with the people telling their stories about the North. As I had learned later from Neumann's (2011) explorations of the aesthetics of the sublime in Gould's documentary work, the trilogy was produced after, at the age of thirty-one, the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould took a train deep into the northern regions of his native country in 1965, where, in subarctic solitude, he began to work on his first radio documentary, *The Idea of North*, "a quiet, contrapuntal meditation on the mentality and metaphor of North in Canadian consciousness" (p.35). Lorne Tulk (The Incredible Tulk: An interview with Lorne Tulk, 2010) implies, however, that although his documentaries were produced by merging the interviews with northerners Gould "was the kind of interviewer, who, when asking a question – which might take five or ten minutes – would explain, with elaborate details, what he expected. In fact, he practically gave the answer that he wanted to hear"(no pagination). That is why perhaps The Solitude Trilogy, unlike other documentaries, makes no claims about its objectivity, accountability, and certainty. It is as Gould acknowledged himself a "metaphoric comment" rather than the factual account of the truth, and that is why perhaps it is such a pleasure to listen to. It seems that Gould was looking for and expressing something he has already found within himself up in the Canadian north in 1965: a state of mind, solitude. The North has helped him to turn his solitude into a work of art, essentially, to tell a story about it.

Siberia is my North, my Metaphor, and the inner journey it represents is more significant than the physical one. Siberia, which gracefully swallowed me into its serene vastness just like hundreds of others travelling there for the very same reason, as it seems to me at present, just to be with themselves – to encounter a particular state of human consciousness, to approach, to understand and to deal with the emptiness that required, at that particular point in their life, some kind of recreation, rethinking, reorganisation. Siberia, the furthest I have ever been from home and the closest I have ever been to myself, is the facilitator of my voice, of my story and some of the sights and some of the words of it were in my head long before I set out on the Trans-Siberian train from Moscow to Vladivostok. Through the words of the people I have spoken to it is always also me who is speaking, it is the solitude forced on me by my Trans-Siberian journey speaking, the brutal uncomfortable realisation of how lonely I am – how lonely we all are – and that it is only memories, our own and the ones we inherit when listening, seeing and imagining the other, and which dawn on us as we move through the world on our own that accompany and sooth us, that prevail, making up a fragile transparent shell that covers and protects, and homes us just about anywhere. In Siberia, in the carriage of the Trans-Siberian train in the middle of the wintering taiga the end of which you cannot begin to imagine, something really does happen to you. Like most of the people who decide to go North, as Gould (1987) tells us, you “become at least aware of the creative opportunity which the physical fact of the country represents and—quite often, I think—come to measure your own work and life against that rather staggering creative possibility” (p.392). Siberia is my ultimate encounter with the solitude, an encounter with my inner self and the politicised journey, travel through and towards myself becomes an essential aspect of my thesis.



## Writing Others

Although I acknowledge that this thesis is largely an autoethnographic exercise, it is also voicing others, the people I met and spoken to on the Trans-Siberian. I have not completed a single formal interview, there are no transcripts: all I have is some scattered notes, a lot of pictures of taiga, a letter, an email address and a phone number which I still have on my contact list as *Siberia* although it does not seem to be connected to any person anymore. In the first hours of my journey, I realised that the only device able to record and play back the volumes of this experience was my body and that it is my memory I will have to rely on. So I listened. The whole of me listened the whole of the time. What my mind played back to me and what I wrote in my chapters when I came back was what those people said but also inevitably what I heard them saying and what I wanted them to say. Conversations with people on the Trans-Siberian are an important part of my thesis. These emerge in every chapter often as a starting point of the story, entry, but in *Landscape*, for example, conversations are the very spine of my telling. There are no recordings and no transcripts, just some notes. In some way, I describe my conversations; I tell them through the process of remembering I imagine them – or best to say perhaps, re-imagine them. Laurier (2013) argues that “to describe is not the same as to transcribe, though the two are clearly, and closely related, the good description is not the same as the good transcription” (no pagination), yet it is never a good transcript which captivates us, neither it is a good description. It is the interpretation, the process which represents a gap between the actual research and the way this research is represented. The notes I made for my *About the Landscape* section *The Bride*, and some of my other more explicit centrepiece conversations, were just a line of words that I scribbled on a piece of paper during the conversation

and did it quite discretely. Keywords from the conversation with Aliona in the *About the Landscape* chapter, for example, are: Aliona, bride to be, cards, love, cards and love, loose engagement ring, fiancée lost his finger, Navy for two years, meeting point Vladivostok, love again (again and again!), poetics, Pushkin, Yesenin, tea, Baikal, Siberia, home, village, wooden houses/bricks, bania, time(?), eternity, blueberries (blueberries as renewable happiness!), vareniki, Ivan ( I think about their fairy tale). These are the benchmark words of my conversation with Aliona, they tell me much more than a detailed transcript would do because each one comes with multiple sensual/imaginative attachments, meanings, interpretations and associations, and I am not bound to go ahead with a particular one. Detailed transcriptions of interviews have been critiqued for “the sea of endless detail” in which the key meaning, the significant moments get lost (Bogen, 1999:97). My story, all of my stories, are happening between those few meaning-charged words and writing them is easy, almost effortless: it is on the edge of creative writing, I agree, however Aliona is real, and our conversation is a fact, those words *were said*. For me they mark memorable, expressive moments of the conversation, which trigger in my mind a visual picture of not only what was said but also how, and maybe why, it returns to me my own feelings as I am not focused on transcribing words: I am focused on telling a story. I transcribe from the tape of my memory. Aliona was a young girl travelling from Moscow to Vladivostok to meet her fiancée. We happened to share the same route, the carriage, and then a cup of tea, and finally – a conversation. There was nothing extraordinary about her then, the extraordinary unfolded when I began to tell Aliona, when I started to write her story connecting the details from my notebook and from my memory, it is only then when Aliona became the beauty, the harshness and the innocence of

Siberia, of taiga, the naivety of youth, of young love and young expectations. Aliona herself transformed into a landscape I both created and at the same time gazed upon in awe, enjoying a godlike moment. The process I had gone through writing Aliona, in some way, resembles the practice of creatively transcribed interviews Parr and Stevenson (2013) employ with the aim of transforming police practices when searching for missing people. They seek to evoke “imaginative feeling work”, and it does require a different kind of language, a different kind of approach. Their Sophie comes to life; my Aliona comes to life, both as real as imagined, convincing, affective and effective. Some would argue that it is possibly an easier way to voice others, it could also be seen as a distorted reflection of reality. Nowhere in my thesis, I claim that my accounts are certain or objective. I believe that all our encounters are filtered by our capacity to affect and be affected, by our ability to feel, to imagine and perhaps we all, as Sebald (2002) puts it “<...>lose our sense of reality to a precise degree to which we are engrossed in our own work<...>” (p. 182). All the stories I told, I told as a part of my own, not in any metaphorical sense – they truly became a part of my memory, and through those stories, it is not only the images of others, but also the one of myself is created.

## **Writing Memory**

When asked what my PhD is all about I often struggle to answer. And when I try to get to the bottom of this struggle it almost always comes down to the simple fact that I am uncomfortable to admit that for four years I worked on something the very essence of which can be easily put into a four-word sentence: it is about remembering. Remembering through and remembering with,

remembering what, when, how and why – the whole of my thesis is composed by/through affective personal remembering and bound to the shifting presence of various episodes from my recent and distant past, from the past of people and places I know and remember as well as the ones I don't know and don't remember but somehow can write about them through the fragile connections with them that my imagination allows. If for Anderson (2004) music serves as a medium for mental time travel, in my case it is the Trans-Siberian train and its rhythms, inducing affective "involuntary remembering", where memory is "linked to an account of repetition as difference, and thus divergence, by focusing on the hesitancy, unfolding, uncertainty of the past as it emerges" (p.9). Memory and the ways processes of remembering shape our identity, our "ongoing becoming", connections and disconnections in our lived experience is an exciting venture in geography (Jones and Garde-Hansen, 2012). There is so much work in human geography done on depths and forms of remembering that I have no doubt mine will find some cosy corner to sit among these. However, it gets a bit lonelier if I try to place it within the terms of *how* it has been written.

My work is best described as an autoethnography written through the episodes of the encounters and experiences on the Trans-Siberian railway journey, which emerges here as a backbone and unique spatial process for the personal narratives and the stories of the others, which intertwining reveal in more depth the complex relationship between self and the world, the present and the absent, and the imagined. My work is about the inevitable mobility of the mind, which sees us losing the ability to stay fastened to physical spaces, images and our own being, and opening the possibility to travel in time, space and memory. The physical landscape of Siberia that becomes almost invisible and then reappears as a series of personal images and stories, feelings and dreams,

suggesting that even moving through the vastest landscapes in the world we are always travelling inward, towards an understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Its also probably right to say that Trans-Siberian railway journey gradually became an imaginative map of my journey to adulthood, the construction of my 30-year-old self through the memories that were illuminated before, while and after travelling. It is essentially about growing up, growing out and growing back into your own skin, into your own loneliness, it is a saga of becoming – and one of accepting.

I wrote my thesis as an ethnographic fiction, increasingly popular among cultural geographers, and described as an attempt “to evoke cultural experience and sense of place using literary techniques to craft conventional ethnographic materials—interviews, participant observation, field notes, photographs—into a compelling story” (Jacobson and Larson, 2014:179) The account I produced fits the description above completely, it is a subjective reflection which embraces and enjoys the creative form of telling, offering the reader an experience of what Lorimer and Parr (2014) call "engaging the full range of human sensibility" (p. 544). Autobiography has found a place within human geography, and I am by no means the first one to utilise the methodology, which Moss (2001) claims has been glossed by geographers in their somewhat obvious neglect to name autobiography as a direct method of data collection and analysis. "Self-scrutiny, individual and collective can contribute to a better understanding of and provide clearer insight into who we are and where our world has come from" (Moss, 2001: 9). The narrative in my work, dreaming of itself as one of the “creative (re)turns” in geography (Marston and de Leeuw, 2013), in which I, as Price (2010) would conclude, sacrificed the visible, the material and representable to admire and write about the invisible, the ungraspable, the shifting. The new

forms of writing do not attempt to evade representation, though according to Dewsbury et al. (2002), it is taken seriously but not as a code not to be broken or illusion to be dispelled, instead "representations are apprehended as performative in themselves; as doings. The point here is to redirect attention from the posited meaning towards the material compositions and conduct of representations" (p.438) Lorimer (2005) stresses that an author brings new spaces of being in writing where the affective capacities of representation emerges and evokes a "more than representational" geographies, where the focus is "on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions"(p.84). It was interesting to read Cook's (2001) engaging account of how his PhD thesis became an autobiography exploring his frustrations within the "cultures of cleverness" of the academic world, "a lot of people have told me it was a brave thing to do writing that kind of PhD. Desperate is the word I prefer to use. As I said earlier, I didn't set out to write an autobiographical PhD. It was supposed to be about a fruit "(p.118). I did not mean to end up producing an autobiographical account neither, and my upgrade report stands as a proof of that. Initially, it was planned to be a rather conventional account of long haul railway journey experiences. I was going to spend 2 weeks in Siberia, come back and then write about the people I met, about the rhythm of the train, the rhythm of the bodies, about the sensations of my own body, about the community that forms in the carriage, the familiar and the other, and the landscape. I was going to document my journey carefully; I intended to interview, to observe, to take notes and to record voices, to take pictures. This work was going to be about the great train journey through

Siberia. However, gradually my mind started leaping from the rhythm of train to the memories from my piano lessons, from thoughts about the harshness of the landscape to the experiences on the bus taking me to work, from the history of the Trans-Siberian to my grandmother's kitchen, and here I decided to stop trying to impose a structure and just let the narrative flow with all the impressions, associations and memories that poured into it. It is important for the reader to know that I did not set out to craft a creative means of telling, rather the form suggested itself, it is like at some starting point of the writing process my text was infected with a rash of subjective, imaginative telling and I could not stop it spreading all over the growing body of my thesis. As a result, I produced a text, which could be regarded as a literary ambition, and which is, as Lorimer and Parr (2014) suggest, traditionally seen as "<...> a bit full of itself. Too fussy, too cocky even" however in no way an easy option (p. 543). It is not an easy option because of questions of content and purpose, style and shape, and the presence of deaf ears in the wrongly chosen readership, and it is lastly the question of timing – Lorimer and Parr (2014) list all the pitfalls of the storytelling. Being not sure about the purpose yet, aware that style and shape are far from perfect however happy I am with the content, reading the Special Issue of *Cultural Geographies* I have a reason to believe that at least I got the timing right. Adopting the voice I write in, be it on the verge of the sentimental and confessional, I am convinced that the text cannot be liberated from its author, it came into existence through the body and mind of my person, it contains my literal DNA, it is unique and could not have been written by anybody else. Here I am saying that I can probably write about something else, I can exclude autobiographical moments from my writing, but it is increasingly difficult for me to change the way I am telling. It is probably about as difficult as

it is for a left handed child to write using the right hand even though it is possible, hence the writing is never as good, or just never as confident. The function of ethnographic fiction is to evoke, not to represent: "Because its meaning is not in it but in understanding, of which it is only a consumed fragment, it is no longer cursed with the task of representation. The key word in understanding this difference is "evoke"...since evocation is nonrepresentational, it is not to be understood as a sign function, for it is not a "symbol of," nor does it "symbolise" what it evokes." (Tyler, 1986: 129)

Benjamin's autobiographical (2006) account of his childhood portrays a sensitive, lonely, urban picture of a child in 1900 Berlin; it portrays home and city spaces, cultural diversity and the isolations of the big city through episodes of past rather than chronological account of life events, flows of memories reviving people, events, and spaces. Himself he admitted that employing this particular style of writing he hoped to confront the treasures of the past through "images, severed from all previous associations that stand – like ruins or torsos in the collector's gallery – in the sober rooms of our later insight" (Benjamin, 1996: 611) But there is something else about this writing, precisely about the form, about the charge lingering in the words and between the lines. There's something else in writing that has been done well and Kathleen Stewart is the one who proves it to me. I fall in love with her texts. They excite me. When thinking, in any context, about Stewart's (2014) article on road registers, I will firstly remember how it felt reading it, almost to the scrutiny of the rhythm of her sentences, which will revive in my mind the scenes I was able to visualize while reading, the mood, the pulse, the vibe, the sheer pleasure of immersion, making my experience of the road as pure, as good, as captivating as hers - in its own way, in my own way. Just as well as fiction does, and it is for the least exciting



to be able to assign this quality of fiction to an academic piece of work. Stewart uses, as she outlines "a creative non-fictional, or fictocritical form of writing/theorising to approach the road as a live composition". She further explains that this form of writing allows her to "slow down and shrink analysis to home in on a minor and intimate moment of the road's existence" (p.550). It is how we tell/retell the stories of our own or stories of other people that matters. In her *Precarity's forms* Stewart (2012) explores through creative writing four different scenes of precarity – wintering New England and her father's death, her mother getting old, the road and the holidaying on the banks of Barton Springs – and draws attention to how writing can represent before anything else *a way of thinking* as it "hones attention to the way that a thing like precarity starts to take form as a composition, a recognition, a sensibility, some collection of materialities or laws or movements." (Stewart, 2012: 518). Drawing upon Heidegger, she calls for meeting the world, not as interpretation or raw material for exploiting, but rather something forming through an assemblage of affects, routes, conditions, sensibilities, and habits (p.524). Experimenting with the interview narratives Parr and Stevenson (2014) expect to provoke "imaginative feeling work" among the police officers in the process of tracing missing people (p. 575). What a creatively recomposed interview transcript can do, they assure, is a help to create "empathetic affectual resonance" among police officers tracing inquiries. Their proposal to creatively process interview material in order to enable "a new kind of conversation about being missing" admittedly echoes Wylie's (2010) expressed ambition of practicing cultural geography "as a form of writing both critical and creative, at once scholarly and story-like" (p.212) In 21 stories DeSilvey, Bond and Ryan (2013) do exactly that, allowing you to *wander* through landscapes built by creatively pairing images with words,

acknowledging the worlds that are there to be revealed by the close ups of the familiar objects around us. They admit the presence of unnameable affectual moments of remembering the familiar, induced by odd surroundings and atmospheres of little mending shops they visited travelling in the South West. For me, in their work, those are enclosed, in the pictures. The last one, two pairs of steel shears return me to the worktable of my grandmother. I know the heaviness of those shears tried in the absence of adults and the sound as they grow through thick fabrics, and the smell of my grandmother's white hair in a perfect bun when she kisses me in my new winter coat I waited for the whole autumn is here for a glimpse and just for this glimpse of returning, a glimpse the duration of which I cannot determine, for this returned moment, for this returned world, 21 stories is a worthy read for me. Reading, just like writing, is always personal; one is always looking for familiar, personal, affectual in the text, in the picture, in the person, in the world, if you like, and I could not see how or why cultural geography would seek to discourage or limit writing which allows the affectual engagement of the reader. The telling with the written word, Lorimer and Parr (2014) argues, remains one of the most powerful currencies available to us, and when done well it has huge power and potential (p. 543). The geography I have written is based around my train journey through Siberia, but as you will travel through the pages of this work, I would like you to feel that you yourself have also made that journey, dreamed my dream, travelled through time and space, imagined, and so – experienced my landscape.



## ABOUT COMMUNITY

*"Before the rational community, there was the encounter with the other."*

(The Community of Those who have nothing in common, Lingis)

At the beginning of my Trans-Siberian journey, one of my fellow passengers told me that the carriage is full of invisible people. *Невидимые люди*, he said, people that are there, but cannot actually be seen. I knew what he meant, and I knew what he meant exactly when early in the morning in Irkutsk, the station where we both got out, he approached me in front of the central station building to shake my hand and wish me luck and it took me several seconds – few of them were moments of pure astonishment – to recognize him. There was a different person in front of me, transformed instantly to fit his cold and fresh morning routine reality in Irkutsk. So I had gone the remaining kilometres from Moscow to Vladivostok with this idea of myself and others being ghosts, mere reflections of what we were, unplugged from our normal lives, the source of our identities, links, and connections. It was like we were all rewriting ourselves and connecting in some strange temporary, but very intimate and personal manner. Had our conversations then made any sense, endless three, four hours, and sometimes overnight discussions, confessions, passionate arguments, acknowledgements, even tears, had anything else but the fact that we were all at the same place and time shunted through the Siberian landscape, connected us? And if nothing did, why do I still long for the awkwardness and warmth of the moment when a complete stranger who just got on in some unmemorable station of Siberia and placed his bags under the seats offers to make me a cup

of tea? I have never belonged to any community, or rather I found it hard to fit in, adapt or share values, moreover emotions; I always distanced myself from people grouping or grouped for certain reasons, therefore looking back on my Trans-Siberian journey after six months, I try to understand why I gave in to join a “community” formed through a mere chance and destined to dissolve slowly losing its members to their destinations across Siberia, and how I found comfort of the community among strangers. Train carriages, these mobile cabins have been slightly denied as places where imagination, affect, fantasies, dreams and memories mingle with the visual, material and sensual. We are said to be less and less connected with each other, and we are certainly less dependent on places, daily commutes transforming us into the community that, if not anything else, can collectively experience solitude (Auge, 2002). However, we inhabited the streets and coffee shops and airport lounges, managing to feel at home among strangers in Starbucks or the metro, and, in my case, an overwhelming sense of belonging to a 36 person “community” in a carriage of the Trans-Siberian train.

### **The Carriage**

The Russian 3rd class (*Platzkart*) carriage has eight opened compartments each providing four sleeping places and space for luggage, plus additional two sleeping places on the other side. There are no doors or curtains, separating 36 people from each other; the only more private areas are lavatory and smoking cabin at the end of the carriage. After spending the first 12 hours in the carriage with 36 other people, the smell of food, alcohol, sweat, cigarettes and coffee, the journey that I imagined to be about seeing the beauty and vastness of

Russia through a train window, slowly shrunk into 30 square meters of the carriage, and the faces of the people in front and around me.

There are several ways communities are talked about today: they are lost, regained, imagined, performed, and realised. "Community" is one of those words, as Bauman (2001) puts it, that not only have positive meanings, but also a good feel about it: it is good to have a community, to be a part of one. Above all, it provides individuals with safety whether it means the safety of sameness or comfort of sharing differences. Community? Even starting to speak of community is difficult, because what is a community? While the functioning of it is said to be imagined and securely glued by routine and repetition in visible consumption (Anderson, 1991), experiencing it is something more complicated, involving sharing of feelings, lifestyles, memories, or moments of everyday.

In his famous *Imagined Communities*, one of the key theories about the unification of the nation state, Anderson (1991) proposes that national communities are given the same consciousness by exposing them to the same printed media materials and so creating collective awareness of their common identity. In other words, for Anderson the nation primarily exists as an idea in peoples' minds. He further argues, that all communities larger than primordial villages of face to face contact are imagined; our national belonging, according to Anderson, is imagined too, as we never know or meet fellow members, the bond, things that we believe in and things that hold us together, exists only in our minds. Anderson (1991) also suggests that communities, national communities are constructed and the image of being a community, the impression of shared identity is maintained by performing certain ceremonies, in particular, the ceremony of reading the daily newspaper, which he calls an "extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost simultaneously consumption

("imagining") of a newspaper-as-fiction" (p. 35). The members of modern society are connected by the awareness that the ceremony of the daily newspaper overview they perform are repeated by thousands of others, even though they have no clue of the identity of those others. Routine and repetition in visible consumption secures imagined community, makes it believe in the commonality of its members: "<...> newspaper reader observing the same replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life"(p.35).

The mass sale of distribution of newspapers and novels gave a huge boost to the rise of an imagined nation; people suddenly became aware of the "fellow readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (p. 44). Every nation is imagined to be a community, because according to Anderson "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (p.7) Analysing Anderson's notion of imagined community in the context of globalisation Ritzer and Dean (2014) suggest that "imagined community is clearly much greater reality than ever before because of the developments far beyond print capitalism and not dealt with by Anderson" (p.120). Ritzer and Dean (2014) further argue that the internet, cell phones, e-mail, blogs enabled widely dispersed populations to maintain, create and disseminate continuing sense of imagined community, making Anderson's notions and examples seem dated.

The general understanding that being a part of community necessarily involves sharing of some kind of bond or common aim is queried by Nancy (1994)

introducing thinking of a community, which releases itself through the body, its senses, and exposure of its senses without communion or bond. Not arguing against rational community, Lingis (2000) admits the existence of another one, community that forms in the situations outside the rational community frame “that demands that the one who has his own communal identity, who produces his own nature, expose himself to the one with whom he has nothing in common, the stranger”, the community not simply absorbed into the rational community, but recurring, troubling it (p.10). Bauman (2000) describes a community that is connected not by rational aim or vision, but derives its power from the sensual orientation, “precariousness and uncertain future, from the vigilance and emotional investment which their brittle existence demands”. The key argument concerned with contemporary communities are being beyond integrity, identity, and most importantly having no future, no vision: finitude or present is the very essence of community's existence (Nancy, 1991). New communities group in liminal, in-between, non-places – airport lounges, coffee shops, and commuting trains – not constituting a community in any traditional sense. However, in some way they are still “together”, taking some communal form, bounded by the same rules, often sustaining the process of social interaction by semi-conscious non-verbal communication. Bauman (2000) argues that modern (“liquid”) community can be defined by shared interests, identities, and attachments that, unlike the traditional communions, is less and less connected to a place. In other words, a modern community does not need a place to be (feel) connected; a place is not a link nor a background anymore as this kind of community is not intended to last. Building upon my experiences on the Trans-Siberian I am interested in how the exposure of bodies and emotions and other particularities of long haul train travel contributes to



formation of mobile community, which despite its temporary, fragile nature keeps its members bonded for the time of the journey and is strengthened by the situations threatening its established balance and security.

Overiewing early Soviet cinematography, Widdis (2003) discusses the transformation of the perception of the train: in 1930 the train loses its dangerous dynamism and becomes a stable space in which Soviet citizens meet and converse as they travel across the country. As she further outlines “the speed of train travel – the view out of the window – is obscured by the creation of a train carriage as a key site of Soviet community <...> “, it serving as a microcosmic space for social interaction (p. 137). Landscape rarely appears on the screen; it is replaced by the domestic protective microcosm of the carriage (p.138). It is amazing how little the scenery has changed since in Siberia and essentially on Russian trains because of their dated interiors, and slow movement passing the landscape full of Soviet legacy, it feels like nothing has changed at all since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this way being on Trans-Siberian feels like you are in a heart of a landscape, you do not belong to: a time traveller in a country that ceased to exist more than twenty years ago. As outlined by Creswell (2008) in his *Constellations of Mobility*, taking mobility seriously, involves “thinking through and connecting movement, meaning and practice across scales” as mobility just as place, space and territory “involves a politics of hierarchy, of inclusion and exclusion”. He further suggests the presence of historical and geographical constellations of mobility - more or less structured senses of movement that connect movement with narratives and practices (p. 27).

The Trans-Siberian railway journey, if completed non-stop, takes slightly more than a week, 7 days, and total of about 180 hours, the length of it transforming the experience from what one calls train travel into something more of a mobile life: sleeping, eating, obeying the rules, learning, adapting, negotiating your place among others – becoming a complete, integrated part of the carriage physically and socially – the proximity to the people around you and the lack of physical space not allowing you to distance yourself: you are always present and always exposed. On the Trans-Siberian carriage, one is not simply sharing the itinerary and space, one is sharing very intimate moments of the everyday:

I felt uneasy before the train moved, it was awfully quiet. Women in front of me changed her into nightwear as discretely as she could manage two pairs of eyes trying not to watch her. The train finally moved the lights were instantly dimmed. We sat face to face in silence with the middle aged women in her nightwear looking away whenever our glances met.

There is something even more about this place, more than just the inconvenience of repeatedly exposed intimacy – inside as well as outside of the carriage: there is something about the mode of life, gazing outside the slowly moving train window into the long dark nights of late autumn and the monotonous ready for the winter nature with its wide expanse of fields at the end of which there are already gatherings of shimmering snow. There is something about this enormous vastness of the country, some weird harmony in being rushed east from Moscow to Vladivostok through the eleven time zones and all the nameless grey villages of Siberia, something very special just about being here, when most of the time you cannot really tell where you are – you are always somewhere in between two stops marked on the long red line on the map, which are hundreds of kilometres apart. Sometimes, especially late at nights,

when only the dimmed lights stay on for the peace and convenience of night travel, it feels like a dream, almost surreal: walking up to the toilet through the narrow corridor separating open 3<sup>rd</sup> class carriage compartments and meeting somebody who was not there the stop or two stops before, a stranger, who smiles at you – your bodies slightly touch when you pass by in the narrow space – and in the morning he is gone, like he was never even there, without a trace, unnoticed - the overnight passenger of the Trans-Siberian train. The real and the imagined, the temporary and deeply rooted are very close in here. My own existence on the train is almost weightless; I will be almost untraceable after I hop off. My fellow passengers and I share some form of “non-existence” or freedom or transitional unconsciousness, invisibility here in the carriage.

Long haul train travel is often admitted to being a quest to immerse the body into the different context satisfying and offending – intriguing senses, encountering, being there “in your own skin” (Crang and Franklin, 2001). Apart from apparent discomforts and challenges of such travel and such encounters, there is an inescapable irrational appeal of being so close, of being vulnerable, open, of being free from common links and realities and establishing, negotiating new relationships with the train, its rules, the other. Everyday commuting has been widely researched, providing accounts of shifting relations between people and things on the move, reflecting on the banal everyday movements and their affectivities (Anderson, 2004; Creswell, 2006; Watts, 2007; Letherby and Reynolds, 2005; Laurier, 2004; Lyons and Urry, 2005). The essential difference between everyday commuting and long haul train travel is the fact that it is the journey, being aboard – moved, being among the other in this particular way, and in the case of Trans-Siberian journey also - completing

the distance - what matters, not the destination. In her paper on art and craft on train travel Watts (2008) concludes: "arrival is when there is no further to go, no further rearrangements necessary, no more socio-material and imaginary work to do; and the destination <...>becomes an experience and then a memory" (Watts, 2008:726).

Experience and memory are produced and captured in the carriage of the Trans-Siberian; "Life on board is getting to be a bit of a routine now", reads one of the blogs on the journey, "The trick is not to think of it as a journey to somewhere, and to count off the hours until you get there, but to enjoy it as an experience." Arrival marks the end of experience here, as one of the local passengers explains "it's a very short life, starts when your board ends when you get off", and the experiences of this "short life" is determined by the others you are sharing your journey with: "it may happen to be loud or really quiet, depends on the carriage". By "the carriage" my fellow passenger meant "the people on the carriage"; naming them "the carriage" he gave all the passengers on the train a kind of communal identity, abstracted from the individual bodies, seeing them as a whole: a group, a power, an atmosphere; acknowledging a relation or rather a "common existence" framed by the space of the carriage, kept together by its movement and its rules. Auge (2002) exploring the life in the metro proposes individuals in the carriage pay attention to the "mobile other", observes each other becoming aware of the communal links or their absence, acknowledging or denying each other's presence. At the same time certain rules of the metro orders passengers of the underground, making them more in common by imposing a certain order:

"It is thus quite obvious that if everyone has his or her "life to live" in the metro, that life cannot be lived in total freedom, not simply because freedom could ever

be totally lived in society at large, but more precisely because the coded and ordered character of subway traffic imposes on each and every person <...>(Auge 2002:29)

Nancy (1991) believes that the essence of such being is sharing of singularities, sharing not some kind of bond or common aim, or commitment, but sharing their very existence. In his works Nancy sets up a difficult task to himself – to undermine any concept of communion, communal unity. He seeks to deconstruct communities as wholes, as mythical necessities. The first line of his *Inoperative community* announces the disintegration and dissolving of a community, followed by the description of the breakdown of communism, revelation of the absence of united and completed community it represented. Nancy (1991) moves from an unphysical or metaphysical concept of community to the mortal body, the idea of community being nothing else but sharing an illusion of some kind of shared essence, a myth. Communication, therefore, is something more organic than communicating an idea or quality, communication is at its very essence a relation that communicates no sense except for the relation itself. He further argues that being in common is a question of the place, the space-time, the mode, the system of signification in general rather than a question of sense; the in common of being, as Nancy (1991) explains, transpierces all meaning. The example of passengers in the same train compartment illustrates how being in common happens, effortlessly and essentially, how a relation forms where at the first sight there is no relation:

Passengers in the same train compartment are simply seated next to each other in an accidental, arbitrary, and completely exterior manner. They are not linked. But they are also quite together since they are travellers on this train, in this same space and for this same period. They are between the disintegration

of the "crowd" and the aggregation of the group, both extremes remaining possible, virtual, and near at every moment. This suspension is what makes "being- with": a relation without relation, or rather, being exposed simultaneously to a relationship and absence of a relationship (Nancy, 1991: 7).

Nancy's (1991) approach suggests that community does not exist as a group of individuals connected by some externalities. Instead, he insists that community is formed by singularities simply appearing or *compearing*, as he terms it, and the exposition of singularities is communicated, without being a bond or communion. In simple words, for Nancy (1991) nothing really produces or makes a community, a community is a natural state of human existence, and therefore, needless of any ideological foundation, the community always exists.

The individual experience of mobility, specifically train travel and the in-carriage and through-carriage sensations has been explored by the recent studies (Watts, 2008; Bissell, 2009; Wilken, 2012 ) However, experiencing the carriage as a group, or as it is tempting to suggest, a temporarily bonded community, the ways and importance of connections that form between passengers and the communal experience of the journey, has not been given such a great attention. As outlined by De Sapio (2012), there is the general assumption that carriage communication died out over the century; however, merging of second- and third-class travel produced much greater opportunities for mixing, "the opportunities for experiencing new mobilities as a group established temporary bonds between passengers, made stronger by delay or accident". Nash (1975) exploring the connections and links developed by bus riders outlines that settings such as bus could be "more complex and social psychologically relevant than their specific, rapid and impersonal surface would suggest" (p.99). He names bus-riding a "peculiar urban form of belongingness" (p.100)

describing the bus riders and drivers as a mobile community united by specific regulations and challenges. Nash's bus community just like Auge's (2002) metro passengers peacefully (or not) coexisting in the same carriage forms a "community" which is not ritualistic or rudimentary: it is very organic, arising from the routines of everyday rides. Being organic and communicated naturally by passengers the mobile relationships are not easily grasped and reflected on: asked why he offered to make me a tea before even asking my name the guy occupying the bunk in front of me seemed not to understand what I am talking about, finally replying:

"I saw your cup with a teabag in on the table, so as I was going to the boiler anyway...I just asked".

For Lingis (1994) our face-to-face encounter with the other is always exciting, spontaneous and unmotivated, and always bears an obligation to respond, "The face of the other is the original locus of expression" (p.63). There is this awkward moment, when two strangers sitting in front of each other try not to look at each other's face, and this attempt is almost painfully obvious, their eyes wondering around or buried in a newspaper, until if their eyes meet, and meet again for a second longer suddenly they both feel an urge to say something or smile. Levinas (Levinas and Nemo, 1985) explains it drawing the line between saying and the said, saying is the fact that the face of the other demands answer, response: "it is difficult to be silent in someone's presence; this difficulty has its ultimate signification proper to saying, whatever is the said" (p. 88). In his Community of those who have nothing in common Lingis (1996) building upon Levinas' ideas calls this responding the other entry into communication, one that is not formulated in terms of the common rational discourse, and "in which you find it is you, you saying something that is essential" (p.116). The

non-rational response, organic communication, encountering the stranger in a foreign land, looking into his face gives birth to a "situation in which the saying, essential and imperative, separates from the said, which somehow it no longer orders and hardly requires" (p. 109).

### **Hot Water Boiler: Becoming a Community**

"I woke up. My feet were cold. The compartment window was black, and the carriage bounced (only Trans-Siberian bounces, because the rails have square rather than staggered joints). The dream was an intimation of panic, guilty travelling and loneliness that made me lonelier still when I wrote it and examined it. Vladimir had stopped sketching. He looked up and said: "Chai?" I understood. The Swahili word for tea is also chai. He hollered for the provodnik. Over tea and cookies, I had my first Russian lesson <...>."

(Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar*)

Creswell (2006) suggests that mobility being "a general fact of displacement" is also a "dynamic equivalent of a place": it is never neutral or static as it is always influenced by passing powers and given various meanings – it is always experienced, performed. In contemporary society "mobility is as central to the human experience of the world as place" (p.3). Different modes of transport, as Urry (2002) puts discussing the lure of physical, corporeal proximity in travel, involve "very varied combinations of pleasure, expectation, fear, kinaesthetics, convenience, boredom, slowness, comfort, speed, danger, risk, sociability, playfulness, health, surprise <...>" (p. 254). He further argues that all travel



results in “intermittent moments of physical proximity to particular people, places or events and that in significant ways this proximity is felt to be obligatory, appropriate or desirable” (p. 258). There are multiple ways to be in a place; to inhabit it. Different motions open different possibilities to be affected reinforces feelings of possibility, which Anderson (2006) also describes as a force that pushes the bodies to act. Being physically co-present allows novel socialites, the negotiations and ways of being among others being a significant part of performing the art of travel. The Trans-Siberian experience is engagement which Crouch (2010) calls flirting with the space – more explorative, uncertain and experimental way in which spacing can occur: “the unexpected opens out; we discover new ways of feeling, moving and thinking, however, modest these may be, unsettling familiar and expected cultural resonances and the work of politics. Encounters like this may happen in increasingly diverse and complex ways across multiple spaces and in the ways in which we engage them” (pp. 5-6). Feelings, memories and materialities become rearranged in new ways “in our composition of the self and its grooved relations”, emotions affect our lives, identities, spaces that “emerge in our doings” and “vibrations of the space that affect us” (p. 68). As Katz (1999:343, cited in Thrift) explains it “between oneself and the world, there is a new term, a holistically sensed, new texture in the social moment, and one relates to others in and through that emergent and transforming experience”. My aim in this particular part of the chapter is to analyse how a simple act of making and having a cup of tea in the Trans-Siberian 3<sup>rd</sup> class carriage becomes a way of negotiating ones physical proximity to others and the happenings on the carriage, how it allows a relief from undesired encounters at the same time providing pretext to engage with the interesting, be it an another person or an

event. The process of making and drinking tea has the whole "carriage" united not only by them performing the same activity of tea making and drinking but also by the network of emotions associated with this act.

Today I counted up the cups of tea and coffee I had during the day, and they summed up to an amazing score of 22. Assuming that I was awake for about twelve hours, this means I had about two cups of hot drinks an hour and made 22 journeys to the hot water boiler at the entrance of the carriage.

The hot water boiler in a Trans-Siberian carriage is placed just at the entrance in front of the provodnik's (train attendant's) compartment and keeps the water hot and available during the whole journey. It is used by the passengers for making tea, coffee, instant noodles, and soups. And it is free. People in the carriage were constantly making themselves a drink, drinking, sometimes causing queuing up at the front of the carriage. Auge (2002) talking about Paris underground outlines "the bounded character of the community imposed by the dimension of the subway cars (the container) and the work schedules that determine they are being filled and emptied (the contained)". He argues that crowded hours in the metro, when its full of people, are the ones where the sharing of being is most felt: "<...>a little too many people and shoving – which can occasionally generate into panic – imposes contact, inspires protest or laughter, in a word, creates a type of relationship that is clearly fleeting, but that embodies a shared condition" (p. 31). The lively buzzing carriage at the "peak" times (in the mornings or late afternoons) when almost everybody on the carriage were either drinking or resting their half empty glasses or cups with the tea/coffee/soup on their compartment tables, reminisced of a coffee shop, although none of the "drinkers" was here for the purpose of drinking, and the carriage is by no means an environment orientated to drinking. Regardless

that, countless amounts of tea cups were made; people gathered at the hot water boiler and conversed waiting for their turn and then carefully negotiated the way back to their compartment with hot drinks in their hands. What made people drink so much? Hot water boiler supplying free hot water and perhaps a need of stretching one's legs with a short walk to the front of the carriage, checking on the strange (or more strange) passengers in the carriage or simply wasting another 5 minutes making a cup for yourself and often, your neighbours. If it would not have been for the interior of the carriage, which is nowhere near the interior of modern city café (although giving it another thought, the carriage is also a very intimate space, having a certain seat alignment, and divisions of space facilitating social interaction), at moments it was a real café on rails, a rather noisy and atmospheric one, with people having conversations over their cups of tea or just drifting out of the window holding one in their hands. Allen (2006) says that the ambient power of spaces influences how we are directed to inhabiting and sensing them, different urban settings have a particular atmosphere, a specific mood, a certain feeling affects how we experience it and which, in turn, seeks to induce certain stances which we might otherwise have chosen not to adopt (p.445). The carriage, just like a cafe, is the kind of place where it is possible for the unacquainted to strike up conversations without suspicions that something else is going on (Laurier and Philo, 2006:194). It is a place providing the possibility to be “excited” by others, involved with others with no particular reason or even intention. The processes of tea drinking, tea making on Trans-Siberian broadens the possibilities and ways of social interaction. “The hot water boiler brought us together” (Greene, 2011), I came across this line in one of the Trans-Siberian blogs. But then every single one of them mentions the hot water boiler and the explicit amounts

of tea consumed during the week of the journey: drinking of tea, continuous visits to the hot water boiler, and then finally drinking tea with others, having endless cups of tea and having endless conversations. The hot water boiler provides the carriage with a constant flow of hot water but also serves it as a social spot, being there for the same reason – hot water – provides passengers with the point for interaction: an elderly man smiles and lets a young mother, who came to a boiler with her 3-4 year old daughter and queued just behind him, to fill her cups first. The woman thanks and smiles back. This simple act of kindness creates a link between a young woman and a man, and also me, who is watching and recording the situation. It made me feel safe; it made me feel welcome even though the friendliness of the man was not orientated directly to me. Very often, as Thrift (2004) argues, emotions which alter our social being and relate us with others, come from somewhere outside our own bodies, from the setting itself. The atmosphere of the environment, as Brennan explains in her *Transmission of Affect*, literally gets into individual: affects come through interaction with other people and environment; the emotions and affect of one individual, and excitement or negative energies these affects entail, can “enter” into another. I assume that everybody in the carriage has in one or another way encountered similar situations, and so on the second day of the travel we shared not only performing routine walks to the hot water boiler and ability to recognise each other's faces, but also the atmosphere created/enhanced by the emotions emerging from almost unnoticeable encounters we had on our way.

Knowing that one can always make oneself a cup of warm drink just made it all more tolerable, how? I was starting to set off to my journey to the hot water boiler every time my neighbour decided to change her clothes (even if she did it very quickly and discretely under the quilt), making myself a cup meant I have

to move the whole carriage up to the entrance where the boiler was located this allowing me, as a researcher, to capture and "record" my fellow passengers' activities; I had also noticed, that a number of tea drinkers substantially increased when one of the compartments were having louder conversation/argument, for many (including me, of course) a cup of tea becoming an excuse to pass by the scene of the "event". The place (carriage) bounded relationship gradually becomes more intimate, as passengers continue to live in the carriage uncovering the particulars of their personalities/behaviours; we know quite a lot small things about each other in the carriage, I, for example, know that my compartment neighbour takes two spoons of sugar, the tall guy with glasses from neighbouring compartment snores really loudly, the young couple from somewhere in the carriage almost always hold their hands, they obviously just got together, they are in love. Everybody in the carriage knew I was a foreigner; I was different as I was later told that my face was different, I did not wear slippers, I wrote all the time". People knew what I was doing; I was being observed as well as observing. I was the point (if not the centre) of interest. At the end of the second day of my second leg of the journey from Irkutsk to Vladivostok, I was invited for a "cup of tea" by the people from the neighbouring compartment: "Let's have tea together tonight, we want to ask you some questions". It's hard to imagine this kind of invitation being cast at me in some "less intimate" space than carriage like airport lounge or even a café. As Laurier and Philo (2007) explain exploring encounters between strangers in the café one just cannot begin to talk to another, you have to have a reason for starting a conversation. As time passes the boundaries among passengers in the carriage dissolve, they are not simply acquainted; they live together: see each other eating, sleeping, getting drunk,

and even arguing. The intimate atmosphere of the carriage allows one to start a conversation without it being a challenge of overcoming any conventions; an offer to make a cup of tea for somebody you are interested to talk which serves perfectly as a start and is, probably, most commonly used in the carriage. As you don't need to pay for it, and most often use your own teabags, making tea in your compartment almost feels like making tea for somebody in your own home. In his detailed analysis of café life Laurier outlines the importance of “embodied practices of drinking”, concluding that “very fact of drinking, rather than what substance people are drinking, eases the conversation along” and “how the movements and objects that accompany drinking become resources in talking together” (p. 70). In the carriage, the process of drinking matter as much as why and when one decided to have a cup of tea or coffee and make that journey to the hot water boiler. I would stand up and go for one if I felt my compartment neighbour needed a private moment or my legs needed a short walk, or I was simply bored, etc.; and I never refused to be made one by somebody else. Generally speaking, I rarely had a hot drink because I really wanted one. My drinks were almost always induced by the happenings around me and in the carriage, others, and their actions. And so were everybody else's. Having nothing in common generally, we all were practising the same way to get around the carriage inconveniences, or simply acquaint with each other. In that sense, we very much constituted a community, which Nancy (1991) describes as releasing itself through the body, its senses, exposure of its senses without actual communion or bond: “<...>there is no common being; no substance, no essence, or common identity, but there is being in common” (Nancy, 1991). There is also “the buzz” of it, something that Laurier and Philo (2007) calls a pleasure derived from simple being together. And so, despite all

the discomfort of being exposed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> class Trans Siberian carriage, there also is a certain amount of pleasure in being able to see what your neighbours read, ate, get them caught in their most private, embarrassing moments, listen to their conversations, arguments, observe them quite openly and allow them to do the same, Auge (1995) in his *Non-places* talks about individuals involved into a passive joy of identity loss which becomes gradually “more attractive pleasure of role playing” (p.103). I must admit, that the first twelve hours of my Trans-Siberian journey I denied myself willing to take part in this which evolved slowly into understanding that we have all put ourselves in a very vulnerable position: it was not only me looking at them and them observing me – there was always some kind of exchange, permission, and then connection.

### **Myth and Community: the Enchanting**

“We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story. We do not yet know whether these people gathered together to form an assembly if they are a horde or tribe. But we call them brothers and sisters because they are gathered together and because they are listening to the same story.”

(Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*)

“You are on the wrong train for the real experience”. My newly acquainted interlocutor and I were smoking our second cigarette each.

“This is not thick enough – but you will not know what I mean – in the пассажирский (he meant nameless “passenger” train, lower quality much slower train taking 9 instead of 7 days to complete the distance between Moscow and Vladivostok, usually occupied solely by locals and a cheaper alternative to *Baikal* or *Rosija*, which are considered luxury and which I took) people make love in the compartments all the carriage listening to them and they don’t care” I laugh, and he assures:

"No, really. Ask anybody about summer 2007, train No 239. It was hot, and they refused to let them open the windows. So somebody just pulled the emergency handle and stopped the train. And the whole train went to Baikal for a swim.”

I ask if it is not dangerous. It is, he agrees. And then adds: “It is also very tiring”.

He told me more - the whole story, in scrupulous detail, mentioning also the fine of 5000 rubbles for the guy who pulled the emergency handle...describing the heat of that summer, people’s reaction when the train stopped (according to him, about 50 meters from the lake), the joy of the almost insane crowd which was empowered for those 15 minutes to forget everything and experience something close to a complete freedom or complete unity. He talked a lot with his hands, eyes, very emotional, very proud of this event depicting the national craziness, recklessness, the wild soul of the nation, the real Russians, who cannot and do not want to be enslaved, controlled and can stop a train on a busy Trans-Siberian line to prove that... There is a myth of Lake Baikal’s water: those who drink from Lake Baikal become two weeks younger, and those who swim in it gain ten years of life... Looking for stories about Baikal I come across Kristina’s blog entry “The Legend of Lake Baikal: waters of supernatural power”. And here she is with her friend, jumping into the waters of Baikal in the middle



of winter, I read further: "Freezing would be an understatement. This was the coldest water I have ever been in. Bitter, cutting, piercing cold. Siberia in winter time". The pull of the magic water, the unexplainable power of myth, and then she finishes with the remark that almost explains it all: "The verdict? It was cold. Take-your-breath-away, give-you-a-heart-attack cold. But I could use those 25 years" (The Legend of Lake Baikal: Waters of Supernatural Power, 2011).

Writing about the Trans-Siberian, for me, also feels like telling a story, a bit like telling somebody about my dream, one I had weeks ago and which has already faded in my memory a bit. And it is not because of the transitional limbo, changed physical rhythms, sleepless hours and general tiredness that occur during the long train journeys, it is the way I remember (or not remember) it. There is sometimes a moment, when I ask myself now, sitting in front of all my notes, looking through all my pictures, how can I so effortlessly fill in the gaps of feeling that are not written down, how a simple note of something like "a new passenger turned up at 6 am in the morning" can evoke a whole range of emotions now – emotions not even mentioned in my notes, how can I remember them without really remembering? Do I imagine the way I felt and does it make my writing fiction? Does it make my story a myth? Cupitt (1982) believes that each one of us possesses a story generation function:

Myth making is the primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more or less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life. Both for the society at large and for the individual this story generation function seems irreplaceable. The individual finds a meaning in his life by making his life a story set in a larger cosmic and social story (p. 29)

He further argues that myth has no pure paradigm; there is no perfect myth with all the typical features, and therefore it does not need to be a "traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship" and a narrative of "archetypal or universal significance". In his account of a mythological role in journalism Lule (2001) sees myth and news as narratives telling great stories of humankind for humankind, not as a false belief or an untrue tale of doubtful origins. He proposes and follows a more contemporary understanding of stories of myth as a rich and essential part of social life; "in this view myth is defined as somewhat stiffly, as a sacred societal story that draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models of human life" (p.15) One must also take into consideration Fussell (1982) here, who states in his *Abroad* that all travel writing is modern myth, myths that have been "displaced", but still resemble archetypal heroic adventure. Dwelling on mostly Northrop Frye's and Campbell's ideas he implies that modern myths, as well as their primordial versions, consist of three stages: the heroes' call for the adventure, "the setting out and disjunction from the familiar", the journey or adventure itself with its trials and difficulties, and finally the safe return home where hero reintegrates into society (p. 208). Departure and return, first and last stages of the myth, are the most mystic and sacred. Magic in exchange is contained, according to Flemming (cited in Fussell 1982:209), in the fact that returning traveller suddenly moves from a form of "non-existence" back into existence and recovers normal consciousness becomes a "solid", visible and considerable figure again.

The word myth itself as outlined by Williams (1985) coming into the language only in the last hundred and fifty years, is a "a very significant and a very difficult word": being used as a negative contrast to fact and history it also got involved with the "difficult" modern senses of imagination, creativity and fiction (p. 212).

Myths reinforce community ties by providing cultural reference points from which identity formation can be defined and maintained. At some point of my journey, I asked one of the train attendants about this whole train going for a swim in Baikal in 2007 one of the train attendants, and he said he never heard about this event, but “it might have happened”. And so, it might not. But it did not matter; it really did not matter at all: not for me, not for the narrator, not for anybody in the same or the other carriage who listened to that same story when it was told again and again and again. He had after all the gift, the ability and, perhaps, even the duty, as Nancy pointed out describing the person who creates the myth, to tell me and the others that story; to create these reckless characters, introduce us to emotionally charged plot of that day, arising in our imagination a striking visual image of the event, all that coming together to project a variety of ideological messages.

According to Barthes (2000) in passing from history to nature, myth abolishes the complexity of human acts; instead “it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes the world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, the world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.” (p.143) I was on that train, and I was listening to somebody telling me a story that might have never happened but which essentially pictured a view, a scene of how the carriage became united by opposing the order, and the train that is almost never late and depends so heavily on its precise schedule had been stopped. It was a beautiful, attractive story (very emotionally told too) with elements of courage, danger, adventure – and I wanted to believe it happened, because with this story there was suddenly more to this train, this route, these people,

and there was more to my own experience. But then, a myth, according to Nancy (1991b), does not need to be true – it tends to become truth itself, "myth is the unique speech of the many, which come thereby to recognise one another, who communicate and commune in myth" (p.50).

Many words, spoken and written, said, shouted and whispered, repeated and forgotten – shape the carriage, the enduring timeless power of words, of a story – stories. The community of the carriage comes into being through these stories and through the very act of telling these stories. The situation depicted by the narrative was so unusual, involving, exciting, enchanting, that it felt almost real like I was there myself – watching those people running into the lake's water with clothes (delirious and screaming, as I imagined). There was suddenly a connection, a passage through the story: when we were approaching the amazing vastness of Baikal all I could think was could I ever dare to stop the train for a touch, for the freshness of its alluring water. As outlined in hundreds of descriptions, the Trans-Siberian journey itself is almost a mythical experience, when put in the right words it accumulates most amazing, enchanting almost fairy tale like the description - Trans-Siberian is the longest continuous rail line on Earth. Each run clatters along in an epic journey of almost 6000 miles over one-third of the globe. For most of its history, the Trans-Siberian journey has been an experience of almost a continuous movement, seven days or more of unabated train travel through the vast expanse of Russia (Travel to Russia - Russian tours and packages. Trans-Siberian railway tour, (no date). One gets sucked into it, this fascinating description (longest, deepest, biggest) similar to a childhood book's story, by which one's amazed, frightened and pleased at the same time, and finally unseemingly transformed by its astonishing clarity and immediate meaning. As Barthes (2000) stresses in his

Mythologies “what the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality” (p.142), he further argues that myth is constituted by the loss of the historical weight as in myth “things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters the language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences”. The stories about Trans-Siberian, including the one I was exposed to, narratives about people’s courage, friendliness-strangeness, samovar in every carriage, tea sharing, vodka drinking, ever-unhappy *provodnitsa* or *provodnik*, stories that emerge from the limitations, quirkiness and practicalities of the journey, all these combined influences the forming of local myths that in turn assist in defining “the carriage” and the journey: the community and the experience. It does not stay in the carriage, and it does not remain in Russia; it spreads, not only through talented story tellers like my fellow passenger but also through the words of those hundreds of vagabonds who share writings and images of their wanderings online. As Nancy (1991b) sums up the writing of our being-in-common, or of our being-with, as a community of writing: “inserted, alternated, shared, divided texts, as all texts are, offering that which does not belong to anyone, but which comes back to all: the community of writing, the writing of the community” (p.104). And therefore, even before one steps on board the Trans Siberian train one is never empty – never entirely lost or strange on the train or to the people, or totally unexpected the vastness of the country, or confusion with the time zones and language, because it all has been already heard/read/seen, encountered in some way, and is already living (and waiting to be fulfilled) in ones imagination.

## Letter from the Stranger

We were approaching Vladivostok, 2 AM local time, We had approximately 6 hours to go, people were slowly packing up their belongings and the carriage felt emptier, quieter, almost sad with its lights dimmed; nobody was drinking tea or chatting; some were still sleeping, others were just waiting for the final destination. The domestic atmosphere of the carriage transformed into the one evoking emotions of leaving, anxiousness, being in between, displacement. The guy who invited me for tea in his compartment came up to me and asked if he could borrow my notebook and write something in there for me. I agreed, of course. To my surprise he wrote a long two page "letter", in which he was thanking for the encounter: "Очень благодарен за чаепитие, общение и доброту надежд" (I am very thankful for tea drinking (in Russian "чаепитие" – tea drinking is a one word expression meaning not only actual drinking of tea but also a process of socialisation), communication and your great expectations". He expressed his gratitude for my attention in almost in every of the long overcomplicated sentences of his letter and asked "not to forget him and the others". He signed it and added: train Moscow-Vladivostok. It was a long time ago that I last had something written to me in hand writing in front of me, and it reminded me of the last year in high school and our final year memory books, where in a surprisingly similar emotional manner we were putting down our memories, thoughts an wishes before the final separation.

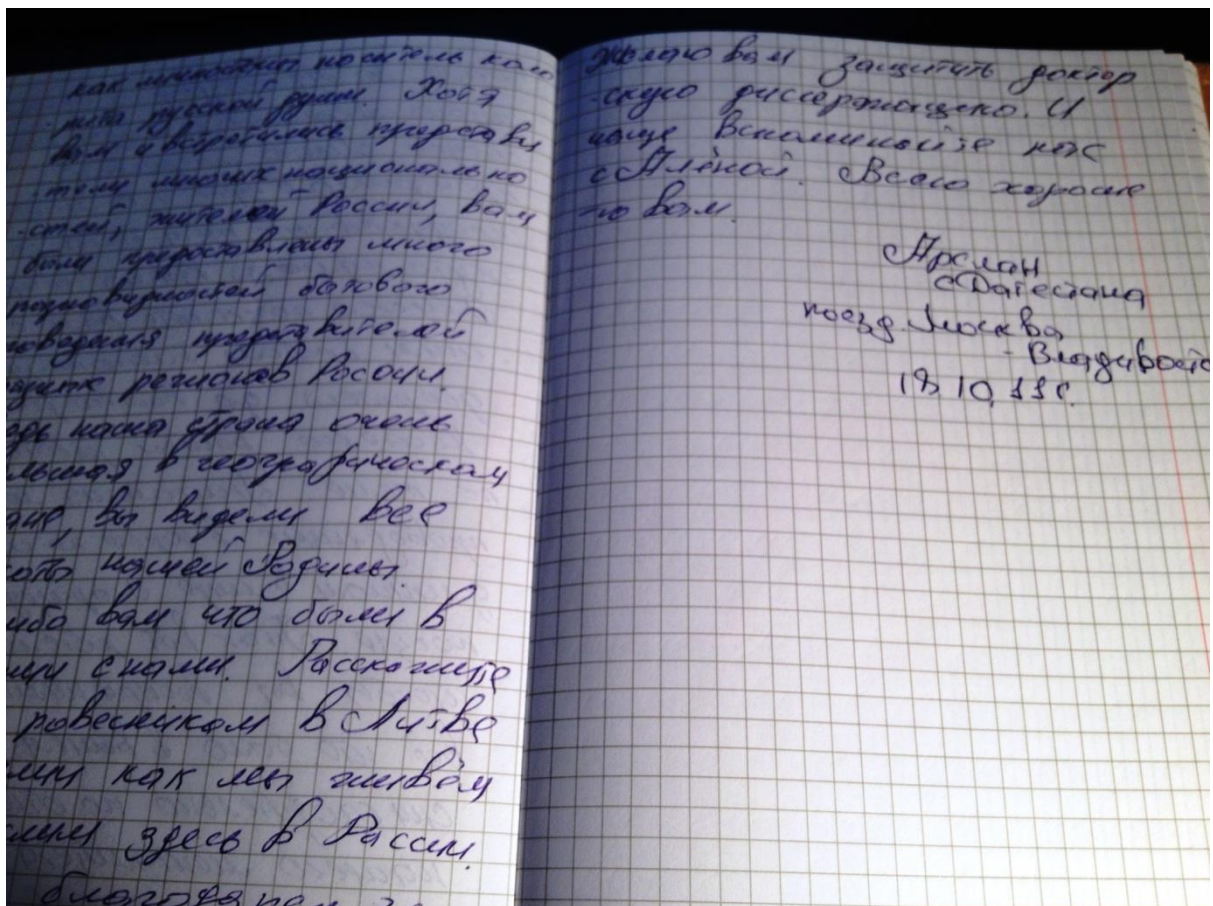


Figure 6 Letter from a stranger in my field diary

What made him write this note? The evening in his compartment we spent together drinking tea, eating cookies and talking, the fact that I was foreign unusual encounter on his usual route and kind of “required” special attention; or was it the tensed atmosphere and excitement at the end of the journey in the carriage last few hours before it reached its final destination. I was thankful for this gesture of his because as Laurier and Philo (2006) put it “uneventful fieldwork is a common part of any fieldwork (p.352) and here I was suddenly provided with an event to talk about in my work. Moreover, I was unexpectedly given something more than a photograph or a conversation to record. A letter, and especially a handwritten letter, resembles a living, breathing being more than any means of today's communication, it is through its jumping Cyrillic handwritten lines full of naïve Russian sincerity very alive, even now almost a

year on from my journey. For me, as a researcher and as a traveller, this letter is a unique piece of memory, keeping me bound to and in a way responsible for (my memories of) the person that had written them. Every time I open my notebook on the page of the letter it works like magic, my mind is effortlessly going back to that quiet early morning in the carriage just before reaching Vladivostok.

Why do people write letters? And why would somebody write a long emotional letter to somebody he does not really know, to somebody that he is not going ever to meet again? To be freed, connect, to matter. I found an interesting entry on what letters, and especially intimate letters written to strangers, are all about in Sischy's (1988) essay "A Society Artist" on Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic work. She starts her essay with a letter for Mapplethorpe by a stranger – a paralysed Vietnam veteran – in which he is asking for one of the signed photographer's prints to hang near his bed in hospital so he can enjoy it. Every personal letter written, she then says, "is to bridge a gap-of distance, of silence, of feelings – and each one is at the same time an object which represents that gap". Personal letters are often deeply intimate means for the expression of a voice that is not heard. Individuals who are imprisoned who are incarcerated behind bars literally or who feel hopeless and trapped by their situation or condition are usually the ones who rise their voices to try to break their invisibility and powerlessness by communicating with someone they see as having power or visibility (Sischy, 1988). The letter in my field notebook was written to me, a stranger, also perhaps by somebody who felt inferior, trapped by their situation, trapped by his endless journeys forth and back on Trans-Siberian, his long and hard working hours in the woods, his everyday struggles providing for his large family, his Russia. It was written to my world: my



education, optimism, curiosity, expectations and my freedom to travel, to choose, my freedom to express. Can a letter bridge such a distance? Still, just for those few minutes during which I am writing these words and those moments that somebody will read them, I am making him matter, and his letter serves its almost unintended purpose: he is heard, and so we stay somehow connected. Community really happens only when it is exposed and there, writing is the sole act that obeys the necessity to expose the limit and which affirms *being in common*, being for others and through others (Nancy, 1991b). Writing about the stranger, similarly to all those thousands of Trans-Siberian travel bloggers, am exposing him, exposing myself, exposing our connection or rather our non-connection. It is me writing about them, those people, more than simply looking back on my experiences, remembering, but putting it all into words, black on white: a story of what I saw and heard, of how I belonged or felt distant, a story that can be shared that is what makes me part of the Trans-Siberian, and part of the “carriage” more than anything. It is my way to connect, and feel connected: writing about them, telling, exposing.



## ABOUT MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

All these years on I still remember my first overnight train journey. I was eight, and it was my mother who took me to the capital on the overnight train Klaipeda – Vilnius. I remember that the immaculately white stone hard bed linen smelled of the bleach, and the corner of the pillow had a little black six digit number sewn into it. The cabin, which we shared with two other people, whose faces I cannot recollect, was boiling, and my mother opened a window to let some fresh air in. When we both settled in for sleep on the lower bunk bed of the carriage, the sound of the train was all we could hear. It then suddenly felt like I *really* heard something, as if that sound pierced through some sort of congenital deafness I was wrapped into. I could listen to the train with all my body, and snuggled next to my sleeping mother I was completely separated from her for the very first time: my body and my mind consciously, independently and willingly became a part of something else. That sound and the on route villages' train station lamps casting their dim light onto us when the train stopped have made a lifelong imprint on my then very young mind. I repeated that journey for many times as an eighteen year old while travelling from my seaside town to Vilnius for my studies, against all the objections of my parents (day train journey to Vilnius took only 4 hours to complete). I was always defeated by a pull of reliving that very first trip with my mother, smelling that bed linen, listening to the train in the unbearably hot cabin and having my tea in a glass in a stainless steel glass holder in the early morning of the arrival. At the age of eight it was my first conscious encounter with the world, its sounds, my own body and its ability to independently experience – with the first sleepless night still so alive in my mind; at the age of eighteen it was my first encounter with myself, me alone

and fearless on the overnight train to Vilnius. Over the last few years, the route has become increasingly unpopular and was cancelled. I will not be able ever to get on that train again to make an overnight journey from Klaipeda to Vilnius, but it has already given me so much. In some sense, getting on the Trans-Siberian was yet another attempt to repeat that very first overnight journey with my mother, just on a much grander scale – appropriate challenge to me now, nearing thirty. And it was, in fact, all I imagined, all I expected it would be: hot cabin, loud wheels of the train, station lamps casting their lights through the carriage window when the train stopped at night, tea and white rough bedding smelling of bleach. But then also it was, and I am certain – is going to be as I continue to remember and write about it – much more.

This chapter on memory and imagination was not in my anticipated plan for this thesis, however, I think now it is necessary for one very simple reason: patching together a picture, a view of my Trans-Siberian journey – this whole thesis – from only what I noted on paper and in the pictures, would have been impossible. This narrative could not be simply built out of memory recorded in some way, or just memory of that particular journey, or simply...just memory. In my previous chapter *About the Community*, I had to ask myself how much do I really remember and how much of it all I imagine? And if I cannot consciously distinguish between the two: does it make my writing fiction? I had to realise, and it took its time, that that journey is something very different to me, and altogether, now, than it was at the time I was travelling: I find and I feel something new about it every time I get to linger on it, dwell onto its moments, having those unexpected little flashbacks when something or someone triggers my memory – or perhaps, as I sometimes wonder, my imagination. However, adopting Husserl's (1952 in Fuchs, 2012) position here I would like to think that

“what I do not *know*, what in my experience, my imagining, thinking, doing, is not present to me as perceived, remembered, thought <...> will not *influence* my mind” (p. 231), I would like to assume that imagination only repairs and retouches the raptures that time has made to any memory. And here, I am also hoping, just like Baxandall (2010) in his autobiographical explorations, that I can be allowed a glimpse into “what shaping pressures have been at work in producing memory-like objects and events I have in my mind – which I believe to be related to memory but not to be simply fragments of actual past experiences – incompletely or imperfectly preserved” (p.16).

Memory and imagination are inseparable in the process of writing this work, taking the approach that “memory is a vital source of imagining, and imagining is a vital process in making sense of the past and connecting it to the present and future”(Keightley and Pickering, 2012: 5). Ricoeur (2009) similarly states that memory and imagination are placed under the sign of associating ideas, and therefore “memory<...> operates in the wake of imagination“(p. 5). Therefore I feel almost obliged to talk about memory, remembering, juggling it all together – completing my journey through the evenings of reading my notes, hours spent on the bus to and back from work, daydreams, my previous experiences, memories and encounters, books I have read and hundreds of pages of Trans-Siberian blogs I have gone through, completing it here and now, or if it is ever to be completed – in the future, but not at the end of October in the small neglected train station in Vladivostok. I have to talk about imagining, a kind of imagining which Keighley and Pickering (2012) defines as imagining of how my memories fit together in retrospect, making sense of it all: finding a place for this experience in my rather uneventful everyday, discovering a whole new emotional dimension associated with the people, places and events I

encountered and, most importantly, being able to talk about it as a part of my past and my present. Memories arise out of the depths of the unconscious and are reworked; they are “to be not only recovered but also re-described”, and so the past is changed with new meanings emerging in our present: “it becomes filled with new actions, new intentions, and new events that caused us to be as we are” (Hacking, 1998: 6). Therefore, I cannot write my thesis without the context of my present and my past: memories, emotions, and encounters. Without all that it would simple be incomplete.

## **Remembering**

To start talking about how I remember, and the particular way I remember, and piece together my work on Trans-Siberian journey, I will probably have, to begin with, my daily bus travel. Edensor (2007) notes that body is not only physically and sensually, but also imaginatively situated in the space and one brings his/her cultural baggage and knowledge along. Therefore numbers of associated memories and images emerge when encountering and inhabiting different places. It is not only our bodies that carry a baggage of knowledge and potentials of feeling, the ambient power of spaces influences how we are directed to inhabiting and sensing them, and as I am tempted to add here re-inhabiting our memories and experiences. Talking about his journeys to Poland and Isle of Skye Terdiman (2009) explains how these prompted his memory for associations with other places, further noting that our mind is incredibly like a web search engine able to produce an endless amount of associational leads or take one anywhere in a split of a second. For him memory, apart from being a

tool of conservation, also is "a register of displacement, mutation and transformation", acting as a medium of our experiences of difference (p. 187).

It happened so that shortly after coming back from Siberia I got a job in a village about ten miles from where I live and as I do not drive it takes me just over an hour to get there by bus – one way. So I spend a significant amount of time, over two hours, travelling on a bus every day, actually one particular bus: bus X33 Chippenham – Devizes (via Calne). I enjoy my bus rides, being very time consuming they also give me a chance to rest, enjoy peace and quiet, read, write, listen to the music. Bus X33 runs every hour, and being a rural service has almost the same passengers on board every day: I know them all by now (and I am certain they do all know me): I know which days they are getting on the bus, where, and even what they usually will be doing on the bus. I know all the drivers too, we even chat sometimes. We were/are really a picture of Nash's (1975) little "community on wheels", portraying a peculiar form of belongingness, space where "a high degree of intimate and continuous ambiguity is changed into recognisable occurrences that involve a mentality of membership" (p. 100). In that sense, my warm and inviting bus space is a four-wheeled replica of a carriage: and I like to feel about it that way. It makes my work on my thesis easier, and it transforms my bus journeys into something more special than getting from point A to point B, from work to home, I am no longer imprisoned by the lengthy every day journey as I am, sometimes very consciously, using it to access, invade and test my memory. For Hutton (1993), past exists only and is remembered just in so far as it serves the present need: in the light of this my daily bus travel serves as connection point between me, my memories and my research, it allows me to dwell on/relive/rethink the emotions of belonging, moving, connecting, observing and communicating

resolving the uncertainties that trouble me as we can always "after-see what memory comes up with", and attempt to make sense of it, figure out why at some moments of our lives we are presented with the certain images from our past (Trediman, 1999, p.195). Daydreaming, as outlined by Bachelard (in Trigg, 2012), is what enables the past to come forth, "the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days" (pp. 65)

Memory can and does attempt to reconstruct the fluidity of lived experiences and emotions, but it is rather a unique simulation than accurate events of "sometime" back then, therefore, as Auge (2002) stresses in his *In the Metro* we are always outside our own history: remembering only makes us observers. Remembering is not merely reaching for something stored on the shelf; it is a totally new construction – as the original event is gone forever. For Auge (2002) his metro journeys in Paris is more than the mode of transport, it is allowing him to connect the intimate details of his personal life, to connect him to places and people, where every station contains a multiplicity of meanings embodying and defining him: "Certain subway stations are also associated with exact moments of my life, nonetheless, that thinking about or meeting the name prompts me to the page through my memories as if they were in photo album: in certain order, with more or less serenity, complacency, or boredom, sometimes with even heartfelt emotion - the secret of these variation belonging as much to the moment of consultation as to its object " (2002:4) When I gaze into the darkness of the rural Wiltshire through my bus window, feeling every bump in a narrow village road, being moved through familiar landscape now estranged to me by the dark, I can almost imagine – and I do imagine, or I remember perhaps, as vividly as I know I would not be able to do anywhere else – being on the train in the middle of Siberia, not knowing where I am: a tiny bit excited,



unsure, and perhaps insecure. As Trediman (2009) proposes "we don't choose these associations, we seem chosen by them. But as a result of their elections, seductively, ineluctably, memory manages us "(p. 187). Moments I feel my memories of Trans-Siberian returning to me are strangely empowering, I feel in control: I can write about it as I experience it anew, as all I and my body have taken in on the carriage with the emotional charge is released and suddenly given weight, the weight of my other memories that join in and the weight of my imagination that glues everything together, it becomes a new texture. Memory is mobile and formative, and it is precisely that which gives memory a creative potential, "but the potential is only realised through a productive tension that arises between memory and imagination" (Keightley and Pickering, 2012:7). Sebald (2002) confesses that writing is the only way in which he can cope with the memories that overwhelm him "so frequently and so unexpectedly", and so he implies that memories and their unexpected emergence is somewhat of a burden, or perhaps that the meanings they carry to the present, moment they reveal themselves is not always easy to bear and understand. Looking for an answer to a mystery of why some places become more central to our memories than others Trigg (2012) argues that each of us is held captive by a series of memories "which in their intensity and depth returns us to a specific time and place. Consciously or otherwise, the places we inhabit and pass come back to us in the present, sometimes affording a sense of familiarity in the centre of uncertainty. At other times, disturbing the course of everyday existence."(p. 16)

After I got back after my Trans-Siberian journey for a short while I felt very disconnected from my normal routines and surroundings, the first week I was waking up in the middle of the night, surprised and excited, feeling like I am being moved and gently shaken, swayed and bounced by the train: it felt like

my poor body affected by the long train journey was in a process of transferring its weight onto my mind. I could not concentrate on simple everyday tasks, and regardless of what my body was going through, the memory of those two weeks I spent in Siberia was somehow missing. People who kept on asking "so, how was it?" must have been very disappointed with my answers as they were always very short and emotionless: like I was not on that train at all or it was not quite me who came back. Months later I smiled to myself when I read the first lines of Thuborn's (1999) account of Siberia: "Siberia: it fills one twelfth of the land mass of whole Earth and yet this is all it leaves for certain in the mind. A bleak beauty and an indelible fear. The emptiness becomes obsessive". (p. 1). Emptiness was certainly something that came back with me from Siberia too. My inability to connect with a very recent event drove me mad. Shortly I found myself going through my old emails and pictures, dating back to my school years, reading them one by one, retrieving and absorbing letters I have written and emotions I had experienced years ago. I found this picture in a folder with other (very few) pictures from 2005. It was taken in February 2005 and named "On the way home". I could not remember the night I took the picture or why I did it, but I knew this particular spot very well as it really was on my way home and I used to stop there very often to admire the view for a minute while crossing the bridge over the train lines to get from the city centre to my flat.



**Figure 7 On the way home**

When I first moved to Vilnius for my Norwegian language studies in 2003, I looked for a flat to rent: I found a studio 2 minutes walk from the central railway station, on the very edge of the tired nine-floor apartment block development built in late 70ies. It was on the 5th floor its windows overlooking the vast field ending at the bend of railway lines, so me, and my numerous mostly Russian neighbours whose balconies were on that side of the apartment building were always the first to hear and see all the incoming trains. I have stayed in the flat for two years, and grew increasingly accustomed to the train traffic: I used to be awakened at 6 o'clock in the morning by the slightly vibrating metallic sound waves in the air and go out to the balcony and open the window to see their massive metal bodies come out of the morning mist and head for the station. I can now say without a doubt that these were some of the best mornings of my life, full of strange melancholy, sometimes a heart breaking longing for

something I was sure I was yet to encounter, and timelessness, *ecstasy of timelessness* (I borrow the expression from Nabokov's autobiographical masterpiece *Invitation of a Memory* (1951), which Nabokov experiences in the fields surrounded by rare butterflies and the blossoming food plants, and which dawned on me standing on the balcony watching the trains emerging from the mist in the early mornings in Vilnius – that unconcealed feeling of unity, connection and liberty at the same time, “ecstasy and behind the ecstasy <...> something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love.” Surely, I experienced the sense of absence of the time and slow uncontrolled almost weightless being on the Trans-Siberian: this time I was the one in the train, or, actually, I was that train, rushing past worn Siberian city landscape, grey 9 floor apartment blocks with tiny balconies overlooking the train tracks and stations, waking somebody up in the early dark morning or just after midnight in Yekaterinburg, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude... and yet it was on the bus, taking me home through darkening rural Wiltshire, where I found those two so beautiful connecting moments in my memory, realized them both and worked them together, beginning to understand why coming into the Trans-Siberian cities, train slowing down to settle into the station generated such an unexpected excitement and joy, an aimless pure joy: in some way, I was always also in one of those balconies overlooking my train *Rosija* rushing by and slowing down for arrival in a nearby station, I was 19 again, I was time and mind travelling: both, my past and my future were changing.

*My Trans-Siberian* as I, and many others who travelled through Siberia by train, like to call the journey, did not come to me easily. Remembering it is a process that I have not completed yet, and the difficulty here is that as the more time

passes, more associations and memories are revealed the more unsure I am where the journey has actually started in the first place, as well as where it is going to take me. But the longer I dwell on it – daydreaming, reading, writing – the more often different details, images, emotions come to my mind as seamlessly and effortlessly as the lines of Blok’s poem I had to learn by heart for my Russian lesson at school at the age of 14 and then stand in front of the class performing in a trembling voice: О, я хочу безумно жить: /Всё сущее - увековечить, /Безличное - вочеловечить, /Несбывшееся - воплотить! (Oh, how desperately I want to live:/Immortalize the real, / personify the faceless, /Give flesh to the non-existent!). The journey, as many others before, is inscribed into my mind forever, but unlike the lines of the poem learned by heart, the lines of my Trans-Siberian journey have the capacity to change, presenting me with new meanings every time they come back to me to be remembered.

## **My Ghosts**

I go back to the bus X33 now, to the day somewhere in late January when the bus broke down in the village of Bromham – half way to its final destination, and got all of us, about 10 people, stuck in the cold and snow, having to walk to the nearest bus stop, about 1 kilometre away, to be picked up by the company’s emergency transport. And so we walked in almost perfect silence following each other’s footprints on a narrow sidewalk. It wasn’t before I got to work later that morning until I could fully apprehend the way it reminded me of one of the very first very first times I encountered Siberia. My uncle, my father’s brother, served in the Soviet army in 1966 and story about his tragic death introduced me to

real Siberia, not my childhood Siberia, the distant magical land of solitude, but to a severe and cruel land of suffering. Since I could remember this story was circulating in my father's family, story which was brought up at every family gathering, my grandmother burying her face in my father's broad chest and weeping quietly as they recalled it: I cannot until the very present moment quite understand why every family occasion had to be embedded with the sadness of remembering him, dwelling over his tragic death in almost the same words every time, performing this sacred ritual at the end of every family dinner be it Christmas, Easter, birthday or christening. My uncle, aged only 22, froze to death in Altay, while trying to walk to find help when his military truck broke down in the middle of nowhere – or somewhere beyond the Ural Mountains, as the family was told - during the dark Russian winter. One detail, very – most – dreadful, one that tormented me during the whole of my early childhood, one particular line from the story that was told and retold again, that one line that will probably never leave me as some kind of embodiment of the absurdity of all human attempt to fight their fate: *had he not got out of his truck, had he just waited there for somebody to come and get him, he might have survived, or at least, he had a better chance to (or a better chance not to suffer that much), because all he did when he got out and started walking in an excruciating cold, wind and snow, reaching above his knees, was walking large circles around his truck.* And that's how they found him, frozen in the tracks of his own footprints; in that circle, he made walking around his truck. The body was brought back, but they never got to see it, as well as they never really got to know him, he has remained that boy that had gone and never came back up to the present day. However, in some very peculiar way, as some almost insignificant sadness, despair and emptiness, he was always present at those family gatherings. The

commemoration – an intensified remembering, as Casey (2000) calls it in his *Remembering*, is only possible through a text and in a setting of social ritual, in fact, almost religious experience. A ritual of telling my uncles story, a narrative which became almost sacred over the years, repeating in an unchanging manner, words, intonation, atmosphere and followed by sighs and tears - always. Even if I was not remembering (I could not be remembering at all on any of these occasions), it did not matter, or it mattered very little. I remembered with others, through others and it was then already “a matter of something communal.” (Casey, 2000:218) In fact, none of my family members could remember it, but together without intending to do so we were creating a memory, a somewhat concrete picture of my uncle's death, the death of his body, picturing his suffering from little information we were given; we were imagining, we were patching this memory not as much from what there was left but rather from what there was not, because one thing we could not really allow ourselves to do was to forget, not to grieve. Because he went to serve so young and because he never came back even for holiday (little holiday he was given he saved and added to the end of his service, so he could return earlier for good), because he died at the very end of his service time none of the family members had seen him for almost three years. In the three years of the separation, those simple everyday domestic memories were gone, those important details, which make up the life and the living were gone, and he was already a stranger. His death and those few details about his death was then all that was left of him, his death, and a few pictures with *Memories from Altay* scribbled in fading blue ink on the other side. Casey (2000) further sums up that to commemorate is to "remember through specific commemorative vehicles such as rituals or texts - or any other available commemorabilia", the past

becomes *rememberable* through the particular text or ritual, at a particular place with particular people, " <...> the past becomes accessible to me by its sheer ingriediency in the commemorabilia itself. It's remembered therein and not somewhere else" (p. 218).

He never crossed my mind while on the train through Siberia, his desperate attempt to survive or those numerous family occasions where this whole tragedy was remembered year to year. But he was present there on that train, I am sure, that he was there in that carriage when I gazed through the windows into the bleak vastness of Siberian fields, just like during those family dinners, he was there tormenting me again, making this beautifully deserted landscape along with its this indescribable sadness feel somehow familiar, recognizable, understandable – precious. Casey (2000) divides all memory into three main categories: reminding, recognising and reminiscing, former one being the most powerful one "an essentially privileged and especially powerful way, of getting back inside our own past more intimately, of reliving it from within" (p. 109). Reliving it from within – transforming the experience of imagining that narrative into the experience of somewhat reliving the story. It was early October when I went, it was already cold, and through the window of the train, I could see the gatherings of snow on the horizon. Siberian cold is different, I was told while lighting up a cigarette outside my carriage in one of the evening stops on the way to Irkutsk: it gets under your skin, into your bones, and then it never really goes away. At that moment there I did not realise that I already knew a lot about it – that cold. But here, only now or only after I can write it all down, clear it to myself, I realize how important my uncle really was, he really is to me, how significantly the story about his death affected me, how growing up with his presence, with suffering and loss, with the process of creating the image of him



walking circles in snow around his military truck in the middle of Siberia, with his freezing to death, has shaped my mind, has created me as I am now: I realise that part of my identity is formed by a memory, which does not actually exist.

Casey (2000) calls it "bewildering", a situation in which one "spontaneously accomplish an activity of remembering" without being sure that he or she can confidently label it as remembering (p. 217). We need a guiding thread, he says, a *Leitfaden* - and we need others, not only others to remember with but also others to remember. There are more. I heard stories about how they came back in sealed zinc coffins, sometimes guarded by the soldiers overnight and till the moment they were buried. Never to be opened. Not to be seen. To stay absent, gone, lost, but not really ever dead to their mothers, fathers, and siblings. Where they even there? Or only the parts of their bodies, where those their bodies? It makes mourning impossible, as Derrida (2012) suggests, nothing is worse for the work of mourning than confusion or doubt: one has to know, to know who and where "to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies – for it must stay in its place. In a safe place." (p. 9) Those stories can be heard everywhere, the narratives about those who never returned, who suffered and died "only God knows how" scattered all over the Communist Russia. The cruelty of the Soviet Army in its peak during the 60'ies not only took lives of those young soldiers it also buried the most important freedom of all there is – a freedom to grieve, to get over, to heal and in a sense, to forget in their empty graves. The ghosts, there are hundreds, in every single village, in every single family – in my family. And the trauma as suggested by Edkins (2013) comes from more than just a situation of utter powerlessness. Essentially it does entail something else:" It has to involve a betrayal of trust as well. There is an extreme menace, but what is special is where the threat of

violence comes from. What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors<...>” (p.4)

The absence of the documents, recording the activities of the young Lithuanian soldiers and their death in Soviet Army during the period between 1945 to 1990, the absence of their bodies, letters, and pictures makes their existence and suffering even more haunting. The fragments from those few letters which reached the families are the only pieces of the reality they lived, the only substantial evidence of their existence and their suffering. The number of people who became victims of the communist regime from 1945 to 1990 is uncertain, and as further outlined by Stan (2013) the magnitude and the difficulty of the impact cannot be measured by the mere body count; “the citizens of democracies can never grasp the multiple shades of utter fear” that haunted those living in the communist societies (p.8). I cannot grasp it, even though I kind of inherited it. Perhaps it takes an adult to accept and understand one's inheritance; maybe it takes a *Trans-Siberian*. I was born in 1984, my communism was already “sunny” as my maternal grandmother used to say remembering over the cup of tea the day when Joseph Stalin died on the 5th of March 1953 and “everybody had to mourn and cry”. Then she used to go to the cool room at the back of the house and come back with the box of old black and white photographs, and find one taken on the day: my grandmother in a floral dress, yellow and orange, she told me, standing behind the wooden fence with her arms at her sides, and the face of a young women, bright and smooth skinned, but so tired and so blank, emotionless, almost indifferent, her eyes looking right at the camera, but not focusing, like there was an abyss right in front of her and she was completely blinded by it. The message of the death of

the Father of Nations was announced on the radio in the early morning on the 6th of March and my grandmother, then a 20 year old, was told to cry by the neighbour, because if she did not cry, if she did not mourn for Stalin *they would know*, and she could end up in prison or even in Siberia. And so my young and frightened grandmother, along with millions of other citizens of Soviet Union, wore black clothes and mourned and cried for Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhughashvili Stalin, the man who controlled, tormented and tortured them for more than 30 years.

After going through the stages where I could not remember and could not connect with a very recent journey and then suddenly questioned my effortless very detailed and emotional recollections of Trans-Siberian, it was rather relieving to come across Baxandall's *Episodes: A Memorybook* (2010) (a book, as Ginsburg (2010) suggests, born out of "physical frailty and distress") where the very first lines points out that "it cannot be unusual to find one's self incoherent, at some point, in the sense of finding one's self difficult to see as something distinct, articulated and whole" (p.16). Baxandall (2010) further argues, admitting that his autobiographical explorations of memory in his *Episodes* are free of scientific grounds, for the importance of the emotional, affective memory: "I do not share a view <...> that when we recall ourselves, we see them as from outside. My experience is that memories are not often directly of oneself, but of what the self-perceived and felt: footprints of one's self. The identity is distributed through memory, not merely represented" (p. 21) For Baxandall (2010), memories that really carry "charge", more than extended past episodes or describable textures of everyday, are the affective ones, ones that made him feel strongly in a certain way, these are the highlights, or as he calls them himself, "vignettes", of certain periods of his life. (pp. 39-40). All the

episodes I have gone through in this chapter were mostly those affective captures of my past which I could almost always effortlessly reconnect to, to be back to those sometimes only 30 precise seconds in my past and feel exactly the same about it, feel like it is now, again. In the background of my Trans-Siberian those important, those “charged” moments are being pulled out, absorbed and reworked then allowing me understand, perhaps not completely, but still with more clarity how and where my Trans-Siberian journey has actually started, and what it really means to me beyond those 9 thousand kilometres through Russia, beyond all its physical aspects. I am beginning to realize that by that carriage, full of strange people, through that vast, monotonic and at times painfully empty landscape of Siberia I have been taken to a point of my maturity, my adulthood, from which I am not capable to turn back, not in power to change anything, and everything that has led me to here, is now illuminated, accessible, and starting to make sense. Besides that, there is something else, something not defined or in any way obvious, like the image of Ivan the Terrible for Barthes (1970). The journey, that train, Siberia itself holds for me “the third meaning”, erratic and blunt “the one 'too many', the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive, I propose to call it the obtuse meaning<...> discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious meaning” (Barthes, 1970: 318-322). And all of it is not what it already carries inside, the emotion, the intensity, the message, it is what feelings and ways of relating, knowing, thinking it can make possible.

“To write about Trans-Siberian you have to meet people who have built it”, he told me, a railway worker going for his training course in Irkutsk, “to understand it, you have to hear these stories how it came to be...the railway. Every meter of

this steel road is laid by somebody's bare hands" – I am not sure if he said that, the last sentence, it is not in my notebook – yet I can hear him say it, maybe I have told it to myself, maybe I have read it somewhere, I do not know, but I can almost see those dirty tired pairs of hands laying down the railway, men – fair and blue eyed – hear them shouting, swearing, smell the sweat and cigarettes, and feel, and breathe in the endless taiga surrounding them. They are alone, disconnected from the whole world, completing something few of them will live to see, consumed slowly by the monotonous labour, by somebody's gigantic idea hundreds and thousands of them will simply disappear. But then, on the Trans-Siberian train, somewhere between Moscow and Vladivostok, and now still writing this in my study in Wiltshire, I can feel their presence. Nobody really needed to talk, nothing had to be said. Everything, grey tired faces, huge soulless buildings and even the plain tasteless white bread I bought in the little stations from deep-eyed women of untellable age, told me about how cold, cruel, how unforgiving and mean this land was. And powerful. There is that immense power coming from the depth of the unendurable taiga, its ever frozen seas, this gigantic railway scarring its massive body and those people whom it has preserved and whom it has taken. Once you encounter it you have no choice but to fear it, to respect it – while crossing in a carriage or at home with rows and pieces and flashes of memories you cannot comprehend. But there, to love it, longing for it and dreaming about it, *is* something else. To love it you have to have something in common with it, a passage, a dark room – a memory lived or imagined, or stolen, perhaps, – a place in you to store and understand the rough monotonous almost painful beauty of this particular landscape, these people, the freedom and the oppression it offers, it imposes on you. To love it, you have to share a ghost with it.

Derrida (2012) talks about learning to live, learning to “live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them.” (p. XVIII) He, emphasises the importance of responsibility, the debt of justice we carry before the “certain others” – victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations – who are not present “either to us, in us, or outside us”. Spirits, he calls them, spirits we inhabit, spirits that haunt us. Being haunted by my uncles’ story, by the story also of the hundreds of others who perished in Siberia’s vast never ending winters, in the Soviet Army, in Communism, disturbed by these uncertain yet ever felt presences through the whole of my childhood, through the whole of my Trans-Siberian journey, now when thinking and writing about it I am slowly starting to understand how it all shaped my presence, and my future, and futures of others like me who have been living in a constant company of their ghosts. And the more we have to go through, to bear, as Sebald (2005) believes, “for whatever burden of grief, which is probably not imposed on human species for nothing, the more often do we meet ghosts” (p.55)

I have to start with the first one. Ghost? Probably. I have to start with the link, or the inheritance, which the ones who die return to the living and which according to Derrida (2012) “must be reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary” (p.65). The legacy we are given, as he further argues, calls for interpretation, and takes part in present without being in any way “natural, transparent, univocal”, because if it was “we would never have anything to inherit from it” (p.18), we would never experience it as a connection between past and the future – it would never return. I was born in 1984, in Lithuania, in

USSR just before it was about to break down. It was a very happy childhood I had, it was simple: I remember most of the television being in Russian – that is how I learned it, rubbles in my mother's purse, queues for sugar and other luxury goods like strawberry scented soap, my father's khaki coloured VAZ, which he drove recklessly and two flavours of the only kind of ice-cream you could get: vanilla and chocolate. It all changed on March 11th, 1990, when the Lithuanian parliament, dominated by the anti-communist Sajudis, proclaimed reestablishment of Lithuania's independence. Soviet President at the time, Gorbachev, issued an ultimatum to Vilnius demanding to recognize the USSR's rule in Lithuania in January 1991. Tragic January 13th events or Lithuania's Winter War or our Bloody Sunday, as it is often called in the press, followed. During the attacks on the Radio and Television headquarters and the TV tower, 14 civilians were killed and hundreds injured. The events were broadcasted on the national TV live, until the broadcast was terminated at 2:00 AM.

Orhan Pamuk in one of his most favourite novels of mine *Museum of Innocence* (2009) talks about the happiest moment in one's life, "when we reach the point when our lives take on their final shape as in a novel we can identify our happiest moment selecting it" (p.98), a moment, not a day or an event, just a moment the happiness of which overpowers the rest – I still cannot select one. However, I do think that some moments can be identified well before one's life has taken "the final shape", as these are the moments that actually shape one's life, accelerate or disturb the formation of mind, marks the beginning, the emergence of something which essentially remains there for the life being, haunts shall I say? And if it would take time and a certain point in time to select the moment of utter incomparable, complete, if you like, happiness, I can name in an instant all the moments that haunt me, experiences that would not leave

me, I can pick them one by one and pin them on my memory board like butterflies: the moments of fear, those of total despair and loneliness. For one of those butterflies, for the first one perhaps, I have to go back to my house in Lithuania, my favourite room, where before even starting to read I got to feel with the tips of my fingers the backs of my mother's books, shelved neatly on every wall from the floor up to the ceiling. One particular book, blue with large golden letters (*Agamemnon*, as I learned later), was always "staring" at me, intimidating me, I felt observed by it every time I entered the room, probably because its golden and blue tones reminded me of the "all seeing eye" I used to see embedded high over our heads in the local church where my grandmother used to take me occasionally. That book was alive, an eye in a cosy dark room's body, watching over my presence, fathering me, controlling my moves and making the whole space secretly sacred. The pleasure of remembering this is immense; this memory is protected, its cosiness is almost shaped like a box, I can go there anytime just as easily as I can hear the rhythmic motion of the wheels of Trans Siberian – it is my safe place in the past. 13th of January 1991 was the day the chaos entered that room, the TV set was moved in from the living room, and I was allowed, after a little quarrel between my parents to watch it along with them. I was six, and it was the night I got to live the war, for once in my life I had to live through a four hours of war, chaos, fear – bigger and more terrifying even in my parents eyes and their shaking hands – a war coming only from the screen, but to which large part of my childhood was sacrificed. The book has stopped watching me, it did not matter anymore, none of them, nothing. The sacredness was broken, invaded, I could almost grasp the tension coming from the TV screen, thick and overpowering, it reached its culmination when the woman broadcasted live said "They, are coming, I can



hear them coming", the last images transmitted were of a Soviet soldier running towards the camera and switching it off, and it was gone, terminated, leaving behind a loud continuous siren-like beep to fill up the room. That moment of disconnection: at six I lived through a feeling of a whole world beyond that room full of books, which suddenly lost its magic, disappear, vanish, abandon me. Why my parents chose to expose me to this I do not know, and I would not ask as I could not ever bear them thinking I blame them for anything, I believe also, it was instinctive rather than well thought out choice. I am sure their intentions were to create, not to destroy, something very important to me, to protect me, to make sure I am aware and alert, make sure I was ready for the future we could face. Only now I can say, that this feeling of losing the world is too big for a six year old; it leaves you with a huge emptiness you later desperately try to fill in, it leaves you totally displaced with no sense of direction in your own environment, in your own mind, at the same time it keeps you alert, questioning, wandering, constantly searching and finally creating your own, but often very distant and insecure, world. By the age of twelve I have read every single book in the book room, and there were already too many things I have done by the age of sixteen, and I wonder if all I am doing by pinpointing those charged, tense moments in my life is trying to justify my own restlessness. After writing down this whole episode, I phoned my mother and told her I was writing about the 13th of January. She got excited and said that she will go through my old stuff as she remembered me drawing that evening. We chatted for a bit. About the things that are only meaningful when you discuss them with your mother: watering the flowers in the living room, the worsening weather and your breathing pattern, which concerns her even over the phone – *are you ok?* – new shoes she got for your father, and the fact, that birds are grouping noisily

above the village and are about to go South. *Really?* I asked her about the books in the book room, *we never had a "blue" Agamemnon*, she cannot remember, and then finally I ask her to send me my drawings from 13<sup>th</sup> of January, knowing that as soon as she puts down the phone, she will go to the living room, step on the chair to be able to reach the highest shelf of a large cupboard for two large boxes, where she keeps the pictures, the drawings and other little bits of mine and my brother's childhood. She will then sit at the small table in the middle of the room, open a box of dark chocolate she always seems to keep somewhere, and will spend two hours picking those little artefacts she gathered together up, one by one, admiring them, overwhelmed by emotions returned to her by their presence.

The evening after our conversation my mother did send me an email with the scans of some of the drawings I made that night. Apparently, as a six year old I just drew what I saw, released my fear (captured my ghost!), but going through that night over and over again I could not remember drawing anything, that memory is simply gone. My mother, strangely, not only put the date on those drawings, but also the time. The one below, the first one, is dated 13/01/1991 at 11:30 PM.



**Figure 8 My ghost**

And, really, here I had it, caught in crayons, my first ghost, and a precise moment it entered the scene. In that picture here, there is in all the innocent simplicity of a child's drawing an exact connection between the past I could not fully understand then, the present I was so eagerly trying to capture and the future which was yet to happen; 13/01/1991, 11:30 PM is the exact date and time when I received my inheritance, the inheritance I had no choice but to accept. But then, as Derrida (2012) suggests, inheritance is never simply given, "it is always a task. It remains before us just as unquestionably as we are heirs of Marxism, even before wanting or refusing to be, and, like all inheritors, we are mourning" (p. 67)

I do not know why now, and when desperately trying to finish this chapter with a suitable ending, one memory keeps on springing into mind, so mundane and so irrelevant that I almost cannot bring myself to write it. It is the memory of my paternal grandmother making pancakes. She was old and rather unpleasant,

since I could remember her, my father's mother, but she was strong, and her hands were two of the most impressive "creatures" I have ever seen, veins popping out from under the skin like there was an ivy growing and spreading its branches inside her. It was as if those hands had a life, a being of their own when I used to watch them; they were dancing for me in the kitchen quick and almost effortlessly elegant and them two making pancakes was one of my favourite spectacles. Pancakes were only made when all of my grandmother's children came to visit – all but one who perished in Siberia. They used to sit around the table, her grown up sons and wait impatiently like a bunch of hungry teenage boys for their mother to make a huge pile of incredibly white, round, amazingly thin, almost transparent pancakes in a huge rustic pan. My father was one of her youngest sons amongst them and her favourite, I knew, because he was always served first. The dough consisted just of water, flour and a pinch of salt; she had once nothing else to put in, I was told – during the war and long afterwards when my father and my uncles were growing up. They had to share a pair of shoes between them just as they shared a pile of those pancakes through the war and long after. But you could forget it all, even the hunger, in the waters of the village's lake, deep green cold waters with water lilies framing them in summer: they used to swim in that lake in the evenings the boys of my grandmother, and fish, and race wooden boats, and do all the things like young boys do – recklessly, carelessly, dangerously – my grandmother remembered and while the thin pancakes were flipped in that kitchen they talked and reminiscent about the lake and boyhoods it witnessed. The conversation never changed; and neither did the recipe of the pancakes – just flour got whiter as years passed – and her sons never asked her to change it, they loved their mother's pancakes as much as I loved watching her make

them, those amazing hands of hers holding the pan and throwing white perfectly oval full moons of dough right up to the kitchen ceiling. I used to stop breathing waiting for the moment when she fails to catch them, but she had never missed a single one. “It brings my childhood back!” my father used to tell me laughing and then he would lift a pancake up with both hands, tear it slowly in front of my eyes into two unequal pieces, and offer the larger one to me. And I would always refuse to eat it because all I could taste in the completely bland texture of the pancakes was that pinch of salt.



## ABOUT RHYTHMS

During our conversation about my chapter on memory and imagination John asked me if it all will not seem to be too sad, too dark, too miserable - the whole chapter, would it not somehow wrongly or inaccurately depict Siberia as a land of total darkness and despair. It *is* a land of total darkness and despair, in the whole of its history it has not given anybody anything, it has just taken, destroyed and abolished, it was never welcoming, never warm, never nourishing. It has this constant feel about it, present very clearly as you get carried into its vast wintery fields, you can quite physically breathe it in and breathe it out, and so be kept alive by it: this feel of a steady, never ending but almost soft, cosy, melancholic sadness within a land, sadness without a reason – and that why it is so difficult to describe it. This sadness affects you, almost like a suffering of a mourning person would affect you if you spent days exposed to his grief. You become sensitised, you start looking inside yourself and discover how beautifully clear your mind is, distilled by the dark, the cold, and the unwelcoming behind the carriage window. In some way it frees you of the mundane, the small, all that really makes up your usual every day and allows you to discover and listen to the usually unnoticeable pulse, the inconceivable rhythm of your past and your present life. Not right away, the journey takes time, and you have time here on the train in the middle of Siberian nowhere. But it is like there in the carriage of the Trans-Siberian you are presented with a map showing exactly where you are and where you have been, a map of memories: you can touch them, look where they lead, could lead or trace where they started, and what they have changed.

So, perhaps, that is the only bright side of Siberia, if one does not count the beautiful views upon its deserted body (I still have dreams about those endless rows of birch trees in a cool but intense sunshine), its sadness. The sadness of this land is inspirational, as only sadness can be, it opens the mind and descends on every memory and thought and through layers all of it your very own being seems not only much clearer but somehow elated, musical, almost poetic. Being in Siberia, travelling through it on that train is like slowly slipping into the dreamy state of spectating the realms that roll in front of your eyes just like monotonous Siberian landscape half consciously, with a new ability to pick up and point out things you have not noticed before. Sometimes, if just for a moment I find myself thinking of sitting in the carriage next to the window and listening to the rhythmic sound of its steel wheels, it is then when I can think of myself suddenly being given an ability, a magic power if you like, of remembering everything, every single detail of what had happened and possibly of what will happen, there the whole of my being becomes one long nine thousand kilometre dream, unforgettable and astonishingly clear as if it has been written somewhere on the punctured line of my route, the movement and stops, of my Trans-Siberian train journey. I crossed 9000 kilometres from Moscow to Vladivostok on the train: an impressive fact, and it was a truly long journey, a journey that really happens, evolves and ends here, in and between these lines, and the last full stop of the last sentence will be my final destination.

### **Trans-Siberian Rhythm**

He, my compartment neighbour, tells me in an obviously annoyed voice without taking his eyes off a tea bag he's dipping nervously in the now lukewarm water



from the boiler: " Do not think about railway travel in Russia as some kind of Russian tradition or culture or sentiment", he grins. "It is nothing like that. It is first of all a necessity. That is why the Trans-Siberian railway was built, and that is why people travel by it – out of necessity". But, I object then, thinking a little while before I pronounce carefully selected Russian words, there is a certain feel about this travel, being on the train for days, its slowness, being carried...He waves away the rest with an impatient hand gesture. "For you, because you are alien, you come from a place where things change quick, nothing changes here. It is steady continuous nothingness. And here you come and here you feel stopped, and you think about it. It is continuity, normality for the rest of the carriage." And then he adds looking directly into my eyes, "It is a burden of stagnation and monotony, it is "неизменность", and he throws me an almost untranslatable Russian noun meaning something like "non-changeability". He then lifts his grooming finger into the air, closes his eyes and whispers mockingly but somewhat seriously "You can hear it". This episode, as many others, surfaced when I was attempting to work on my thesis: daydreaming in the new comfortable swivel chair (computer going to sleep as I had not typed a word for at least half an hour) and watching my four year old circling around in the rainy garden tirelessly with a little blue plane in his hand. I then went on through my drawers, found my field trip notebook, where I noted this conversation but not in such detail. Having searched for the explanation of these moments of drifting off and incredibly clear detailed memories or works of imagination, in this part of my chapter about the rhythms I set out to talk about one phenomenon which was suggested to me by Google when I popped "effects of rhythmic monotonous sound" into the search field: hypnosis, spontaneous hypnosis.

The modernity, Walter Benjamin (1968) writes, allowed us the close-ups, the clarity – the deeper knowledge; “with the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended”(p.236), he says. The camera, the railways, the flows and the captured, introduced us to “unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (p.237) and just as Freud’s theories, he further argues, these “isolated and made analysable things which heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception” (p. 235). The “Naked Eye” cannot see, it cannot capture the different nature, cannot offer an alternative perception – for that one needs the prism of modernity. Freud developed an alternative to hypnosis, a technique of free association used in psychoanalysis, where patients are enabled to comprehend their full memories while fully conscious: “Say whatever goes through your mind. Act as though, for instance, you were a traveller sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views you see outside” (Freud, 2013 in Rizzuto, 2015:103). Klevan (2011) suggests using the same approach in film analysis and asking the same lot of questions I would like to ask in writing about my journey through Siberia: "Can we recall those moments that just catch our eye, but are passing, escaping, possibly lost? Can we bring them to mind, take a hold of them, and describe them? These moments become the beginning of our questioning and investigation (of the film and our self) and the beginning of finding words for our experience. What was it I saw there? Why did it touch me? Why does it leave a memory?“(p. 55).

Throughout the history of hypnosis, speculation about the fundamental nature and underlying causes of hypnosis has been controversial, full of conflicts and passion. The views about the nature of hypnosis have been in strong disagreement, varying from animal magnetism on one hand to imagination on

the other. One of the main questions asked by researchers in the field is how does hypnosis happen? Is it stemming from social influence and personal abilities or has it to do with certain psychological states like altered state of consciousness, trance, dissociation (Kallio and Revonsuo, 2003)? One of the first things I have learned going through this hypnosis related literature is that not all of us have an equal ability to be hypnotised, our levels of "hypnotisability" vary and there is surely correspondence between hypnotic responsiveness and naturally occurring hypnotic like experiences (Lynn and Sivec, 1992: 300). Hilgard (1979) talks about "imaginative involvement" such as childhood fantasy, reading, drama, music, adventure and dramatic arts and their crucial role in the developing of a hypnotic susceptibility. In her *Personality and Hypnosis: A Study of Imaginative Involvement* she concludes that a hypnotizable person "was capable of a deep imaginative involvement and almost total immersion in an activity, in one or more imaginative feeling areas of experience – reading a novel, listening to music, having an ecstatic experience of nature, or engaging in absorbing adventures of body or mind" (1979:5). "Absorption" is another term used by hypnosis researchers which is defined as "readiness to depart from more everyday cognitive maps and to restructure one's self and its boundaries" (Tellegen in Lynn and Sivec, 1992: 302). Individuals possessing hypnotic susceptibility tend to experience periods of deeply engaged attention, where, according to Tellegen and Atkinson (1974), the object of their awareness seems intensified, even to the extent of losing their sense of being a separate self. Lynn (1986) in one of the early articles on the subject calls such an individual "a fantasy prone person". He divides his research subjects, after screening them with the 52-item Inventory of Childhood Memories and Imaginings into three different groups of fantasizers, medium fantasy-prones and non-fantasizers and

concludes that his “fantasy-prone subjects diverged from subjects in both comparison groups on measures of hypnotic susceptibility, absorption, vividness of mental imagery in response to waking suggestions and creativity” (p. 407). Although the link between the fantasy proneness and hypnotisability is not universally agreed on, the relationship between absorption, one’s openness to the different way of seeing and thinking in simple words, and hypnotic susceptibility is significant (Jamieson and Sheehan, 2002).

Without completing hypnotic suggestibility tests available online to wide audiences I already know that I am a fantasy prone, absorptive individual with high levels of hypnotic suggestibility. My love for all things beyond visible and perceivable was encouraged generously by both of my parents from the very first day I can remember: fiction, music, fantasies and daydreams have always been an important part of my life, of my every day and to the delight of my pre-schooler son I am very conducive to imaginative involvement. I always wanted others to get involved too – sharing a fantasy was the ultimate pleasure of my childhood. During the summers at the age of about eight or nine I used to take my little brother to our garden, where we would build a tiny house under the huge red currant bush for two plastic toy tigers. I used to tell him that at night, when we sleep those tigers come alive and they continue to live our game: build, and gather food, clean, play and take care of their little home under the red currant. I used to maintain the little tiger household in the evenings when my four year old brother was out of sight so that in the morning, when we both returned to the garden, I could watch his face lit up with joy and surprise as he realised that our tigers caught a couple of beetles and picked a load of strawberries overnight. Strangely, those summer mornings watching my brother cheer with excitement I used to somehow completely erase from my mind the

fact that it was me, who brought the beetles and the strawberries under the bush, and embrace the game, and believe wholeheartedly the fantasy I created.

Here, then, I come to the rhythm, because experience of the Trans-Siberian is first of all the experience of the rhythm. The journey is performed in many ways like a piece of music or a strange immobile dance (I discuss it further in the following part of this chapter), where your body is carried – moved, stopped, shaken, its functions accustoming all the way through to an unusual and almost invisible partner – the train; yet you are wrapped in its body and taken nine thousand kilometres to its gentle lead. Herbert (2011) suggests that repetitive activities are often linked to reminiscence and daydreaming, where repetitive movement “encourages a narrowed attention focus and the regular rhythm appears to calm or occupy part of the mind allowing other thoughts to occur” (p. 134). Imaginative involvement, she further argues, can be seen as a coping mechanism one employs when dislocated from familiar surroundings or presented with an unwelcoming situation. Fachner (2011) stresses the fact that whether the music or, the rhythm becomes meaningful and intense while experiencing or performing it depends on the situation or setting, and the personal intention attached. It is very difficult to tell now if I had such an intention before setting out for my journey, and I probably did not, but the setting – the setting was perfect. I can throw myself back into the cage of the Trans-Siberian carriage, the cosiness of my bunk bed and dim lights illuminating the narrow corridor between the bunks, somebody passing by to the boiler to make a cup of tea in the middle of the night or in the dawn of the morning, I am not sure, as my hand reaches for the glass of the carriage window to feel the fresh coldness and my eyes unable to wonder just stare at the unclear figures of the landscape rolling by. This and many other episodes are locked in my

mind as well as in my body, almost always readily available and come back with the sensation of the rhythm, the rhythmic sound of the train. My Trans-Siberian journey, certain parts and extended periods of it at for the least, involved entering some kind of altered state of being induced by the rhythm of the train, by the music of its wheels, which put me in touch with my memories, my feelings, the people from my past and from the past in general. It is the longing for this passage I experienced, the expansion of my own self, that is behind my continuously growing wish to repeat this journey at some point in my life. According to Fachner (2011), who reviews the connection between music/rhythm and altered states of consciousness, the rhythmic movements of the body synchronize through the rhythm of the music. This occurs automatically during prolonged activity, without effort or control: allowing one feel united or one with the rhythm. Rouget (1985) in his *Music and Trance. A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession* talks about trance and ecstasy where “trance is always associated with a greater or lesser degree of sensory overstimulation—noises, music, smells, agitation— ecstasy, on the contrary, is most often tied to sensorial deprivation—silence, fasting, darkness”. Herbert (2011) defines trance as a process, which involves “a decreased orientation to consensual reality, a decreased critical faculty, a selective internal or external focus, together with a changed sensory awareness and, potentially, a changed sense of the self.” (p. 50)

Trance is one expression often used in the context of shamanism and shamanic journeys. The word itself is borrowed from Tungus, a small Siberian tribe and was once only restricted to Siberia. A drum is a shaman's main attribute and rhythmic drumming is his way to the ecstasy and controlling the behaviour of his audience. Drawing together the writing of Rouget (1985) and Eliade (1964),

Fachner (2011) writes that “shaman has to build his drum, sanctify it in a ritual according to his or her cosmology, and load it with the energy and tradition needed for the shamanic journey”(p. 366). The drum is played continuously during the treatment process, and the way it is played marks the stations on the shamanic journey. This implies that ritual purposes and meaningful intentions are connected to the playing. Therefore, “the main role of music seems to be to organize and synchronize time structures of group processes in which certain stations in the ritual and intensity stages of the process are phase-locked with specific content.” (Fachner, 2011:366). I cannot help but associate the shamanic journey with the Trans-Siberian one. I would not be the first one to do so, blogs on the Trans-Siberian often mention “almost continual trance-like feel” (How Bicycles Help People Around the World, 2011) Shamanism, according to Hoppal (1984), is a complex belief system, different in different cultures, but generally the members of a given community will believe that shamans can get in touch with the spirits for healing or prophecy reasons or “to take a journey underworld in the state of trance with the help of a rhythmical background music (drum or another instrument), <...> in order to contact deceased”. (p. 95). In the contemporary world, shamanism has to be seen as a set of cultural practises/beliefs rather than religion, where shaman is “the restorer of balance <...> he maintains the shamanic equilibrium of power relations within his community and the outside worlds” (p. 92). The beauty, the effect of the journey shaman takes you onto is not easy to grasp, but first of all, and clearly, it is liberation from the state that perhaps was too immature, fixed, set, or too final. It is solitude you learn from, and the only true wisdom, Ijugarjuk, an Eskimo shaman says, “lives far away from mankind, out in the great loneliness, and it can be reached only through suffering”, and here he

means fasting and isolation as way to access inner world and its visions (Walsh, 2007:64).

Ultimately, both shamanic journeying and hypnosis/trance rely on the power of human imagination to create and respond to vivid and dynamic imagery psychologically and physiologically (Overton, 1998). The difference between the shamanic journey and hypnosis is the fact that “they are each cultural adaptations fundamentally rooted in opposing epistemological realities”, where the shamanic knowledge, unlike ours, resides in “non-ordinary” reality (p.167). According Barabasz (2005) a person can slip into hypnosis without anyone using a hypnotic induction procedure and without the person knowing that he has been hypnotized. He suggests that spontaneous hypnosis, a hypnotic phenomenon, which is a frequently experienced part of everyday life, is not being acknowledged and defined (p. 91). Green et al. (2005) also believe that “shifts in consciousness can occur with and without formal hypnotic procedures in a variety of everyday situations” (p. 262). There are, however, some external factors that may help or encourage the entry to the altered state of mind. One of the most popular and widely researched ones is drumming. The very same drumming used in shamanic practises: slow, rhythmic, and extended. Szabó (2004) explains in her *The effect of monotonous drumming on subjective experiences* how the continuous presence of rhythm in the form of drumming transforms subjective visual experiences and general state of mind of those exposed to it. The participants in the experiment were exposed to a continuous monotonic drumming for (just!) 30 minutes. After the experiment, the subjects were asked to evaluate their experiences regarding four scales: body image, perception, time and meaning. Szabo (2004) concluded that people who were listening who were listening to the drumming experienced “the same strong



alteration of their subjective experiences as subjects who were in hypnosis". Regarding the four categories of evaluation mentioned above, "subjects, while they were listening to drumming, felt their body image change. They felt as if their body had expanded beyond the usual <...>they felt changed in their perception of the surrounding world, and themselves. <...>they felt changes in the passing of time. They felt that time was passing slower or quicker than usual. <...>the meaning of things had been changed <...>they understood or revalue something suddenly." (pp.4-5). Kjellgren and Errikson (2009), who also looked into the altered states of a "shamanic drumming" using a similar experiment, called it "the undertaking of the drumming journey". The subjects of their research experienced similar changes in their perception, also implying that the "perception of time and space was like in a dream" (p. 114). On the Trans-Siberian train, you are regularly exposed to a rhythmic beat of its wheels, it is very clear and always present. Therefore I feel I can link it to these journeys in drumming. It does seem to have a similar effect, although slightly less perceptible on the train, because the rhythm is less intense and not purposely applied. My experiences on the train, where the "drumming" of the train wheels is present for a week, are very similar to the altered state of consciousness induced by being exposed to the rhythmic drumming, especially familiar is the notion of moving through different levels of worlds or realms. It seems that a lot of my work, in fact, the whole 5 years of writing this work, was facilitated by the "drumming" of the Trans-Siberian wheels. Something happened to me. I was able to abandon my original plan for this work, and allow myself a free flow in creative, non-conscious directions.

## The Music

I have mentioned it already in the chapter *About Memory and Imagination*: my awakening in the midst of something which in my sleep felt like derailing of the train, a clash, it felt as if I was going somewhere with a great speed and then suddenly stopped, was stopped. My sight was blurred, throat dry and the bed was still slightly wobbly for a few seconds as if I was still in the carriage on my upper bunk on the Trans-Siberian in the middle of the taiga. My body was still on the train; it felt like it was there, even after I woke up and realised where I was, my body continued to live in the shock of the dream. Here, it was almost like my mind was out of my body for a few seconds, we were separated, I was hollow, and this emptiness felt as something permanent. Suddenly, I wanted my mother to be here, just like she used to be years ago during the long nights of my childhood fever: sitting on the edge of my bed, holding a cool compress on my forehead and smiling at me. This happened for a few times, but for the first time and most vividly on the 7th floor of the Vladivostok hotel in Vladivostok in my double room with windows overlooking the ocean. I knew Japan was somewhere relatively nearby. What did I do?

*I breathe in and breathe out and have a glass of water. The room feels damp. And then I go and open the balcony door. It feels surreal; I only left the train this morning and have been sleeping since the afternoon. That is why it seems like that particular day never happened. The train never happened, and I am just here thousands of miles away from anywhere familiar. I am not happening. Everything stopped. The green lights of the electronic clock on the wall show 3:15. I step into the balcony. It is cold, it is October. Somebody two or three floors down listens to a Russian pop song by superstar Ala Pugachova, it is an*

*old song I remember it from my childhood. I hear a man and a woman: I hear their voices and laughter. I close my eyes, I imagine the world map, and Siberia is huge and white. On a map which appears now somewhere in my mind, probably one of those maps I looked at before my journey, I put a large red dot on my home in Lithuania and another one in the hotel I am at – on Vladivostok, and then I connect them both with the thick red line. I am in a desperate need to locate myself.*

I remember thinking that time in the hotel room on the seventh floor of the hotel *Vladivostok* that it is probably how one feels after one is dead, after one is abandoned of one's all earthly functions, rhythms, all the connections, after one is completely, totally and permanently dislocated, and, at the same time – grounded. It was also the first time it appeared to me how important it is, and important not for some psychological luxury and comfort, but simply for feeling alive and functioning, to know where you are, literally, on the map and emotionally in the territory of your emotions. And rhythm is one way to locate oneself, to locate ones feelings. The sense of rhythm is an inevitability of a creative process – of any process indeed. Lefebvre (1996) identifies it as most important aspect of “moving and becoming” (p. 230). For me it seems that the rhythm is the only process within a human body capable to bear the weight of time lost, the images of memories passing – the rhythm always recovers, always returns first. It appears awoken or simply because it had to re-appear for some reason, almost as an urge and the rest simply follows as a flow of images, memories, words. Kunitz (1978 in Gross, 2013) elaborates on the process claiming that “even before it is ready to change into language, a poem may begin to assert its buried life in the mind with wordless surges of rhythm and counter-rhythm. Gradually the rhythms attach themselves to objects and

feelings” (cited in Gross, 2013: 77). In his conversation with Gross he further proposes that the rhythm is actually a complex of feelings and thoughts “looking for a language, seeking a language” (p.78) With the notion of refrain, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) define a repetition that produces a sense of familiarity, of safety, a sense of self identity in chaos and encounters with other refrains, refrains of other: the rhythm.

In this part of the chapter I attempt to explain how I experienced the Trans-Siberian train as a piece of music, a soundscape, a bundle of rhythms; how the rhythm of my journey, of the train, the physical and inner movement links me, transports me to many places in different times. So there I was, my diary said, immersed into the rhythm of my little world that moved slowly at around 40 mph. Time became different, it was indeed different: over the seven days it takes to travel the whole route between Moscow and Vladivostok, I passed through seven time zones, which means I set my clock one hour ahead once a day. Effectively, this meant that the days did not have 24 hours, but only 23. It was already in some way surreal. The days seemed to be shorter, but moments stretched out, prolonged, intensified. You could actually feel being stuck in the moment, in a panorama that at times changed so slowly it was imperceptible. Rhythms, according to Lefebvre (2004), are extremely diverse, complex, tangled and hidden, and it takes “attentive eyes and ears, a head and a memory and a heart”. Memory, he emphasizes particularly on, is the connecting power enabling us to grasp the present “otherwise than in instantaneous moment, to restore it in its moments, in the movement of diverse rhythms <...> rhythms always need a reference; the initial moment exists through other perceived givens” (pp. 36). The Trans-Siberian journey as it is apparent through my work has become a power, an orchestrating feeling, illuminating and connecting my

memories and my imaginings; it works together various moments from my past and present. Apart from actual events and people in the carriage I also remember events and people that weren't and did not happen there and then, but were somehow related, important, relevant and gradually became a part of that journey.

Lefebvre (1991) suggests that rhythm is an interaction constituting not only the body's external but also its internal relationships; the rhythms of social life or thought are relatively obscure "what we live are rhythms - rhythms experienced subjectively" (pp. 205-207). I will start to talk about the rhythms of the journey, first talking about the very superficial but very clear rhythm that was present through the whole journey and me as many fellow travellers in their online blogs, will refer to as the rhythmic clutching of the train's wheels. I can listen to it in my head any time I want, it is stuck in my body, locked up in there forever; in fact, I like to think about it now as of some kind of balancing inner pulse I gained after my experience of Trans-Siberian and Siberia, a steady rhythm of my adult life, where I am fully aware of myself and things and people and events that have shaped my identity. In a way, I am like Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) child when in the dark, gripped with fear in chaos I comfort myself, I orient myself with this rhythm of the Trans-Siberian which is in my head still very sound, very clear, very calming (p. 311). That rhythm itself is no longer a rhythm associated just with my journey, with the specific place and time, with the certain "territory".

It does not take me long to reference the rhythm of the Trans-Siberian train; a memory arises almost immediately, evoking unpleasant tension in the whole of my body. I can hear it. There is another rhythm I can hear as easily as the beat of the Trans-Siberian. My first encounter, or should I say encounters, because

they happened two times a week for 4 years, with this rhythm were during the piano lessons I took in a huge empty and always cold classroom with only me, my teacher, piano and this present:



**Figure 9 Metronome in motion (2008) Available at:**  
[https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/metronome#/media/File:Metronome\\_Nikko.jpg](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/metronome#/media/File:Metronome_Nikko.jpg)

A metronome. It is a device producing regular metrical beats (per minute) and is used by musicians to help keep a steady tempo or to fix issues of irregular timing, or to help internalize a clear sense of timing and tempo. I dreaded it being set in motion. I dreaded the sound of its metric ticks echoing in an empty classroom. I remember that feeling of my whole body tensing and straightening up, when my teacher would set it saying in her sharp dry always irritated voice: “Dalia, hands up, now – listen to the rhythm, you don’t need to look at the notes

anymore, just listen, tick tack tick tack, hands on, and here you go with the beat, and the music flows, and you do not need to think. Again!" Sometimes she would ask me to close my eyes and allow the ticking of the metronome lead me. I could hear the beat of the metronome, loud and clear as my heart, but in an instant I would forget the music, the notes, a familiar piece I knew by heart for a while already, it would just disappear. Everything would just disappear. And my fingers would become stiff and unsure, and stumble and jump across the keyboard, trying to keep up with the rhythm, while I knew I was failing my tempo miserably once again. I quit piano lessons after four years of agonizing practicing. I deeply regret it now, all the time and so much more in these moments when I sit in front of my old Belarus in my parents' house able to read but unable to play a simple childish piece without long hours of practicing, realizing with bitterness that at the age of eleven I closed before myself the gate to a land of ecstatic freedom that only playing a music instrument can unveil.

In his famous *Production of Space* Lefebvre (2004) outlines that we are only conscious of most of our rhythms when we begin suffer from some irregularity. It is in the social, psychological, organic unity of the "perceiver", who is orientated towards the perceived which is to say towards objects, towards surroundings, and towards other people that the rhythms that compose this unity is given (p.77). Therefore, rhythms cannot be analysed when they are lived. To analyse a rhythm, you have to be out of it. And yet to grasp a rhythm that you have yourself have been grabbed by it, given or abandoned yourself inwardly to the time that it rhymed (Lefebvre, 1996:229). The person attempting to analyse rhythm, according to Lefebvre (2004), is careful not to give priority to any of the sensory experiences, however he or she is not obliged to stay passive. Obtaining the rhythm requires rehabilitation of sensory perception,

listening to the body: the body is the metronome. As for the meaning of rhythm analysis, he states ambitiously “rhythm analysis may eventually even displace psychoanalysis, as being more concrete, more effective <...>” (Lefebvre, 1991:225). Lefebvre (1996) suggests that person seeking to analyse rhythms listens not only hearing “words, speeches noises and sounds, for he is able to listen to house, a street, a city, as one listens to a symphony or an opera”, he is able to hear the music of the rhythms united, in harmony, he is able to listen to the place (p. 229). But if I were to take Lefebvre’s suggestion quite literally and tried to apply, if I can say so, a piece of music to the rhythm of the train, the slow ever present clutch-clutch of its wheels, or if I were to try and find that one particular rhythm of the Trans-Siberian in an existing piece of music, what would it be? My hand starts tapping the surface of the desk, I close my eyes, I am in the classroom once again, and I can hear the metronome beating slowly. One melody appears almost immediately. I find it on YouTube and listen carefully for several times: I am certain I have never played it myself, Gershwin’s short piece Prelude II for piano, also known as Blue Lullaby. Strangely although it was the music itself, the calming swing of its sound that resembled the rhythm of the train and those 23 hour days in my carriage to me, it was the music sheets that I looked up (only in order to assess how difficult it would be to actually play it), the notes on the parallel five lines where I actually saw it: the train lines, the rhythms, piano and forte of the sounds in the carriage. Looking at these happy as a child who had just gone through a struggle to solve a difficult puzzle, I explored the sheets thrilled with how accurately they could embody my journey in such a simple way, black on white, like a scheme or a map:



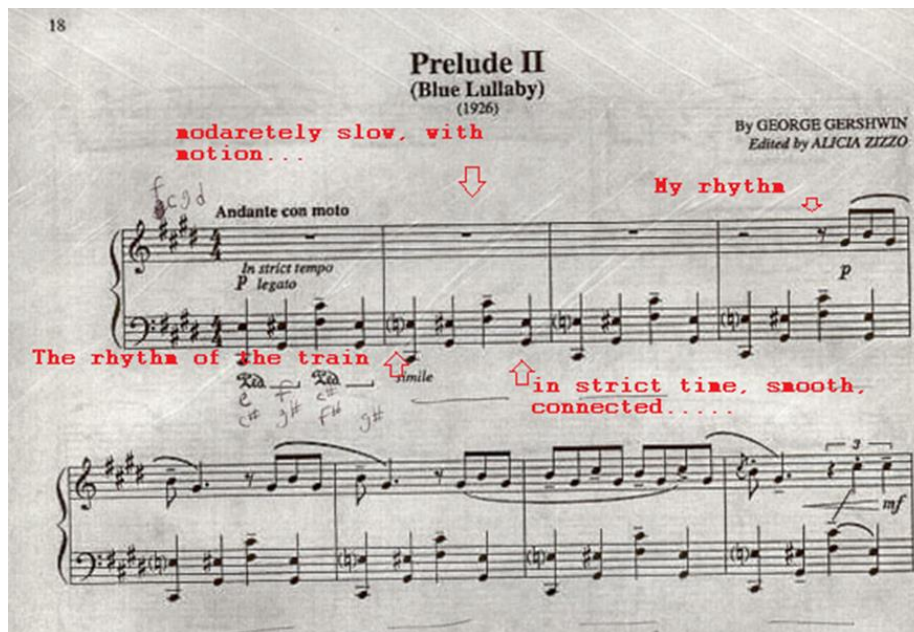


Figure 10 Gershwin Prelude II (Blue Lullaby) (2010) Available at: <http://nite-lite.net/mime/tabs/tab374>

The moment I set my eyes on those sheets, it was not the music anymore, not Gershwin's Blue Lullaby anyway, not only the sound, the rhythm, not only the audible present. It was the visual beauty of those lines, so familiar to me from my piano lessons years ago, and overwhelming joy of how clearly they were revealing to me my travel, the smoothness and the struggle, the pauses and the noise; how connected it all was, my lessons and my Trans-Siberian, me then and me now. For Ingold (2006) we are defined by our movement, and as soon as we move, he insists, we "become a line". It is our trail that gives us an identity, and therefore that heavy long train and the whole Siberia with its sadness and its birch trees, tasteless food and people who age before their time, its grey ghastly towns made up of hundreds of identical 12 storey apartment blocks must be part of my line now. And so are the ticking of the metronome, an empty classroom and the regret of abandoning the piano. My Trans-Siberian through this work has become an assemblage, a territory, as per

Deleuze and Guatari (1987), a territory constituted not only by the 9000 kilometres of smells, sounds and views from Moscow to Vladivostok but composed from all the milieus I ever encountered, from aspects and portions of those milieus – constituted of sensations that enable the mark to appear, an “artistic movement” dimensional rather than directional, expressional rather than functional (p.315). It is my greatest piece of music, my ultimate means of expression; it is like finally playing that piano effortlessly: something I never really managed to achieve.

Depending on the experience of the performer, Gershwin's Blue Lullaby is a rather difficult piece to play; it is definitely not for the beginners. In this particular piece, the main difficulty for any inexperienced player and therefore me would be combining the rhythms, the parties of first and second hand (noted in the Image as "My rhythm" and "Rhythm of the Train"). I am not a great fan of his, but I have always liked this quite famous prelude: I have a thing for pieces that keep a steady beat, mood throughout. I like blues. I like trains. It is music, says Lefebvre (2004) that presupposes in and through rhythm the unity of time and space (p.60). Trans-Siberian train just like music does the same, and if I continue to think about the train as Gershwin's Prelude or any other musical piece that could have come into my mind, it is, indeed, music, an accomplished piece, where I am the melody (the more active and energetic first hand) and train is the accompaniment (steady, disciplined, slower, almost monotonic second hand), and we both are completing each other, are moving towards the end on the train lines through Siberia in total harmony getting better, more familiar with each other as the journey continues. The time I have spent on the Trans-Siberian train is a musical time. Drawing upon the writings of Ingold, Deleuze and Lefebvre, Finn (2011) acknowledges the existence of and defines

the musicscape as “the aural embodiment of myriad social and cultural forces, the sonic result of social rhythms resonating through space. The musicscape depends on movement, is defined by movement, and comes into being through the movement.” (p.4). Lefebvre (2004) argues that rhythm is the least explored sector of musical time; however, it is rhythm that is the essential, intrinsic part of any musical discourse. Without the rhythmic structures, which, according to him, inhabit every aspect of music from the position of the notes on the staff to the personal rhythm the musician imposes on the performed piece, music would not exist (pp. 58-59). The Trans-Siberian train would not exist without that ever present loud clucking of its wheels and gentle rhythmic swinging, because just like music, with almost the same effect so accurately described by Lefebvre (2004), it purifies, it brings “the compensation for the miseries of everydayness, for its deficiencies and failures” (p.66). And then Lefebvre asks if musical time coincides with lived time? Or with imaginary time (duration)? The body and its rhythms remain no less a source of music: the site through which creation returns through strange detours (Lefebvre, 2004:65).

The train set the rhythm, the background, the atmosphere, the scene in strict *tempo legato*, like a metronome in an empty classroom, and I let it lead me, adjusting to its movement and its stops, in my own slow pace in total harmony, conversing, sleeping, dreaming; my mind was faster, up and down, here and there, not ignoring the rhythm of the train but merging with it as a melody would in a musical piece. It is only the rhythm of the train, the lead of its steady ever present metronome like beat that allowed those notes of my mind, confused, mixed up and played too quickly at times, to find their place on the lines. Two years after my journey, it is still that rhythm. As Serres (1995, in McCormack, 2002) beautifully puts “one writes initially through a wave of music, a

groundswell that comes from the background noise, from the whole body, maybe, and maybe from the depths of the world or through the front door, or from our latest loves, carrying its complicated rhythm, its simple beat, its melodic line, a sweet wafting. A broken fall. One cannot grip one's pen but this thing, which does not yet have a word, takes off" (Serres, 1995:138). Derek McCormack (2002) admits trying to develop a writing style allowing the paper to become "a kind of emergent happening, a movement of lines that are take-off in different directions and with different speeds" (p. 470) My writing does not come from an effort to justify somehow or enhance the personal nature of my work. It is an undisturbed flow of memories of places and of people in the rhythm of my Trans-Siberian journey for which I only provide an organisational spine by dividing it into chapters. Lefevbre (1996) argues that concrete times have rhythms, and that rhythm is always linked to a specific place, its place (p.89). In my case, the rhythm of my journey, of the train, the physical and inner movement links me, transports me to many places at different times, creating a three dimensional map which transcribed to words becomes this work.

I remember that when I was a young child – and that was in the early 90's – my father recorded a cassette tape with children's poems by Lithuanian children's poet Kostas Kubilinskas for my brother and me to listen to in bed before the sleep. This was to compensate the evening hours in front of the television he and my mother spent following the events of the breaking Soviet Union. Bedtime stories were was something sacred in our household, and neither I nor my brother would sleep without the ceremony of a book opened in a dim shade of table light and one of our parents patiently sitting on the side of the bed reading for us until we drizzle into sleep. A cassette tape was something different all together. I remember the impression the whole process made on

me. My father would put the cassette player in the corner of the room, close the lights and press the blue play button which made, it seemed to me then, an incredibly loud sound in the silence of the dark. Then I would hear the tape starting: the first few minutes of the recording would be empty with the slight hiss, then my father's voice would come out from that hiss, out of the dark, and I could see it as a bleak line in the room, coming from that corner and rolling out towards my brother and me, making figures and jumps, as the voice tone and words changed, enclosing and surrounding us. Apart from the voice, during the whole recording, I could also hear the cassette player mechanism turning the spools of the tape by turning spindles threaded through the main spools at constant speed. After the last words, just as at the beginning of the tape, the turning would last for a minute or so longer and then stop altogether, the cassette ejecting automatically with a loud click. I forgot the content of most if not all of the stories and poems, but the sound of the turning cassette spools, the hiss of the silent parts of the recordings, the warm line of my father's voice circling in the room and surrounding me in the dark is one of the most vivid and powerful memories of my childhood, in some way it defines me, defines how I felt, how it felt to be me then. The Trans-Siberian 20 years later was, first of all, a trail of rhythm, of sound, atmosphere – the turning of the wheels, moving – being moved through the dark, and so making a line, becoming one which will always stay with me as one of the most important experiences of my adult life. This whole work is composed by following this and other rhythms, the movement of the train, sounds, bodies, memories, and here I realize that in order to grasp that I obliged (totally unintentionally) the reader to make an effort to listen to a wordless movement rather than just merely read what has been written, I asked you, the one who reads it to hear it as well, not as a piece of

music but rather as an echo of a familiar or newly discovered rhythm, maybe just a hiss – even a small possibility of it happening excites me.

## ABOUT LANDSCAPE

I dreaded this chapter since the day its name was put among others on the white sheet of the paper: Community, Rhythm, L a n d s c a p e. While *Memory and Imagination*, just after I finished *Community*, arrived unexpectedly, smoothly and almost effortlessly making it three with my favourite one on the rhythms, the fourth one, deliberately postponed and pushed to the end of the line, the L a n d s c a p e has always stood there like a thick granite wall beyond which was imprisoned my ability to write about something I could not think and feel through, I could not relate to. For the whole 3 years of writing my thesis after my journey in 2011 there has been a tension between me and the L a n d s c a p e, my unwritten chapter, and the landscape, the land of Siberia which I realised I did not *experience*, not in a way I should have anyway. It scared me, because the Trans-Siberian journey is supposed to be about landscape – it almost screams landscape in its very name, Trans – Siberia, across the huge land – and my upgrade report stands there as a proof I expected it to be – but it was not, the landscape was not central, it was there as a background, a cover of a book – I never pay attention to them. It is familiar this monotonic beauty, endless taiga, and powerful, overwhelming vastness: and this familiarity comes from before my journey, some of it almost inherited, I wrote about this in my *Introduction, Memory and Imagination* chapters, feared and treasured – and loved. My camera took over 300 pictures of Siberia through the train windows, why it does not feel like there was any real physical presence of a land?

From the very beginning I knew that I would struggle with this text, and most probably end up writing about my struggle or somehow avoid doing it at all, although I realised pretty soon that I cannot avoid either L a n d s c a p e, nor

landscape, they refused not to be there posing a very difficult question: how I am going to write them? I suppose that my reluctance and lack of enthusiasm for writing this chapter emerged partly from the fact that I thrive in confined and relatively small, safe and manageable spaces. I thoroughly enjoy cabins, rooms, and carriages, ultimately - my head, and I am very uncomfortable in the territories my body cannot extend to landscape, the horizon, and history, in other words, something bigger, wider and almost always essentially collective. However, I feel also that I am unwilling to let go of my Trans-Siberian. It grew into me through the process of writing this work over the last three years, became a part of my negotiations with the everyday, and, in some sense, my silent companion and often – a place to escape. This is my last chapter, and this completes the body of my thesis – this is a goodbye, and I can already sense a huge emptiness dawning on me.

There are no pure impressions, Merleau Ponty (2002) argues, imagining is the closest we can get to the world around us, perceiving is only possible if one can relate it to something, suggesting that one must not wonder whether he actually perceives the world, accepting inevitability of the fact that "the world *is* what we perceive." (p. 18). I would like to think that in the end, I was able to locate and write the landscape of Siberia, and it was indeed my imagination that helped me to weave that text in which the land I travelled through, or perhaps, the meaning of that land is present. However, there is one read in particular that helped me to realise the way to approach my Siberia: Munrane's *The Plains*, a book suggested to me by John, as a read he thought I would enjoy. With great relief, I was convinced to finally give up the idea that the landscape I had to write about was *outside* and that it was only accessible if I remembered *seeing* it. The landscape was within me, it was already transformed from the very beginning of



my encounter with it, the touch of the sight, the gaze upon the land, that pure impression lasted a split of a second – just enough time to breathe it in, just enough time to take a picture – and then it was infused with the stream of memories and imaginings, converting into a *tellable* material of my own, and so also a possibility of my projection, meaning and story. In *The Plains* the quest of obsessive search for meaning in the landscape, "meaning beyond appearances" ends, it ends as an outsider's failure to see and express the world beyond his mind, his own obsessions; it concludes with a clear emphasis on the impossibility of expressing the landscape through a visual medium. Having in front of you a text about the landscape, reading the landscape is already succumbing to a mission of understanding something that ceased to be a visible land, a "somewhere" on the map you can someday visit, because the only place where that particular landscape exists is in that text in front of you as even the mind that projected it on there does not hold them – captured fragments of a dream – anymore. As Murnane concludes, the landscape is "<...> simply a convenient source of metaphors for those who know that men invent their own meanings." Landscapes that impressed me the most were always the landscapes I have never actually seen, never a material land that rolled in front of my eyes. Taken from the pages of the books I cannot even identify anymore, they live in my head as compelling visions or maybe more so like patches of the picturesque ceiling of my mind under which everything else happens. For me landscapes fully appear in texts and texts only, I can see them, I can sense and appreciate them in their whole beauty only when they are *written*. Their fullness with all their meanings that cannot be grasped and evolve unless it is dreamed, imagined and told by somebody who managed to transcribe the visual around into more than a description of the material land.

Reading such landscape one can feel the atmosphere, that made up not only of the soil and the skies and ending in the line of the horizon, but also that which is created through the people, their words and their feelings, their thoughts and their actions, the conversations, the silences, interpreted, weaved together by somebody's imagination into a story, into something that can acquire its own unique presence and can continue to live and thrive separated from that physical land of its emergence.

### **Approaching Landscape**

The landscape, according to Wylie (2007), belongs not only to external, visual, real world but also something, which “takes shape within the realms of human perception and imagination” (p. 7). He further defines landscape as a way of seeing things; therefore individual accounts of landscape always bear the signs of particular values, attitudes, views and expectations. Wylie (2007) splits the landscape into “material and mental aspects, objective and subjective, science and art, nature and culture” (p. 14). Landscape is not quantifiable, it is not land or place, Ingold (1993) argues in his influential *Temporality of Landscape*, the richest part of landscape does not exist in the visual world, there is a fabric of experience within, therefore landscapes are always discovered, as he puts “meaning is there to be discovered in the landscape” where every feature is “a potential clue, a key to meaning rather than a vehicle for carrying it” (p.172). An imagined landscape is “a landscape of not being but becoming: a composition not of objects, but of movements and stillness, not there to be surveyed but cast in the current regard. It is, in this regard, closer to music than painting”(p.10). Ingold (2012) objects the division between inner and outer worlds of mind and

physical environment. To imagine for him then, is to dwell, “to participate from within, through perception and action, in the very becoming of things” (Ingold, 2012). The notion of dwelling, encouraged by influential writings of Ingold, has become means of theorising landscape and place, suggesting that non-dwelling accounts of landscape experience are inauthentic and one-dimensional (Cloeke and Jones, 2001:650). Wylie goes on criticising this approach as “too subject-centred, too humanist even, in so far as it tends to replace a detached meaning-bestowing “cultural” mind with an active, sturdy and involved dwelling body” (Wylie 2007:185). Landscape, he insists, should be continuing to be seen as a venue to question “experience”, “subjectivity” in themselves, where “landscape can be defined phenomenologically as the creative tension between self and the world” (p. 62). Nonrepresentational theories should enable one to inhabit, “ghost certain spaces between the critical and creative, the academic and the literally” (Wylie, 2010:108). Rose (2006) points out that landscape is experienced through and within numerous past associations, therefore although landscapes present multiple possibilities for interpretation, only certain ones can be actualized. He suggests that instead of being analysed as "systems of presence" landscapes should be explored as "dreams of presence" which he describes as "...means of attempting to hold onto the worlds that always eludes our grasp" (p. 545) and further indicates "an active desire to mark the world and orient becoming in the face of alterity and the anxious emptiness it presents" (p. 547). For Rose, landscapes should be seen as "intimate collections of material sensations where other dreams of presence (dreams of who we are, of where we belong and of how we get on with life) are consigned" (p.539).

## **Dreaming Landscape**

"Dreams come before contemplation. Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is a oneiric experience. Only those scenes that have already appeared in dreams can be viewed with an aesthetic passion" (Bachelard, 1994: 4). Does Bachelard mean that we are more connected to landscapes we are already familiar somehow through the works of our imagination, dreams and desires? I had known a lot about Siberia before I set my foot on the Trans-Siberian train in October 2011, I surely was not heading into the unknown. The whole year beforehand I spent going through travel blogs, pictures, maps, and various reflections of a land I was about to encounter. I find, strangely, that I will never be able to recover from that pre-journey experience, it is still very much there lingering as a clear well-remembered dream, those pre-mediated sights, thrills and expectations. Although my Trans-Siberian was an entirely different experience, I cannot dispose of my initial "travel" in preparation for that journey. Moreover, it seems at times more real, referenced, mapped – thorough. Like no imagining or dream, it had the beginning and the end. And maybe it was more real, an entirely different, yet journey, and it seems almost like I travelled when I read, viewed, mapped and researched, looked at the photographs and read the texts of others, and then when I travelled I only dreamt.

Before I could start to write my chapter, I needed to start somewhere where I thought the experience, the visual experience of the landscape was at its peak, somewhere where the Trans-Siberian landscape was central and uninterrupted, pure if you like, with no people, memories, associations disturbing my encounter with it. Where I am granted, like Wylie (2009) looking down onto the Mullion Cove, an "untarnished" perception of things, landscape revealing to me its true

textures, and he says, "These sorts of moments can never last. Or more truthfully, they never really come to pass" (p.276)

And "the place" I found the physical, the visible landscape of Siberia to be most accessible surprised me.

I dream about Siberia.

Most vivid, visual dreams and dreams that one usually can remember clearly and in detail occur during the REM (Rapid Eye Movement) stage of sleep, the stage where one is not deeply asleep yet, studies show that although the brain executive functions that remain relatively inactive including functions such as rational thought, linear logic, and episodic memory, as well as primary sensory and motor function (Hoss, 2013). Hartmann (2011) suggests that that dreams introduce new material into established memory-guided by emotion, organising that memory based on what is emotionally important to us in other words our emotions play a significant role in dreaming: they induce dreams and determine what we dream about. Jung (1973) suggests that the primary function of dreaming is to restore our psychological balance, and they are, according to him, "most readily accessible expression of the unconscious" (pp. 283). Recurring dreams show up repeatedly to demand attention; they signify there's an issue or perhaps a trauma, that needs to be addressed. Dream is a safe place, Hartmann (2011) says, he then goes onto comparing the activity of dreaming to therapy as according to him, they each give the subject a safe place in which to make connections between the trauma and other relevant memories, experiences and issues so that the trauma and its associated disturbing effect are eventually integrated into the person's life (Hartmann, 1995). Mostly because their occurrence is related to traumatic experiences in

waking life recurrent dreams are in a vast majority of cases reported to be unpleasant.

My dream is not unpleasant. It is very pleasant indeed. It is the same dream over and over again. For the first months after my journey, it occurred very frequently, once every fortnight, then every two months or so. It is now very rare, but it still comes sometimes. I am afraid to lose it; I am afraid never to wake up again to this calming sensation of continuity; feeling reassured that my mind managed to secure and allows me to access a fragment of my journey, to remember, dream, relive the purity of the impression. Here is the dream. I could find almost the exact embodiment of it in one of my pictures, a view, which stretched for miles, and miles. This photo is not edited; this is taiga – almost surreal – as one sees it out of the moving train window.



**Figure 11 Taiga**

The dream always starts with the loud sound of the train; it is noise I only experienced in the smoking cabin of the train – space connecting two carriages and space least isolated from the noise of the train. In the carriage this sound is subdued; in the bit that connects two carriages in this exposed cage you can feel the power and the real impact of the train, every little twitch and turn, every slight irregularity, it is almost like you are standing on the rails. I took most of my pictures of the landscape in this noisy little space as it gave me the freedom to access the windows – the landscape from any angle without bothering other passengers who often cast unpleasant looks onto me and my camera. I spent a lot of time here. And this is where my dream returns me. Well, not exactly. It is only the sound (sometimes also fragments of conversations, but they seem to change, while the train's sound is always the same) that appears and then I see the rows of birch trees passing by, framed in the horizon of blue skies and yellow taiga, endless rows of birch trees and this yellowness lasts for hours and hours, it seems. The carriage is not there, the train is not there, in a sense that they are not visible, me myself, I am almost not there – it's like me and the sound both become the landscape. It is like my consciousness is first transposed into the sound, which then turns into the rolling monotonic images of taiga. I wake up with the feeling that I heard what I saw, unable to properly separate visual from the audible, pleased with a sense of complete immersion. Just like in my dream, on the Trans-Siberian train, you do not have the luxury of silence, no episode of my journey I recall is merely visual. All the images of the landscape on Trans-Siberian are imprinted on the memories, fragments, clipped on the line of the sound, and they are inseparable. There is always something and someone, or a mix of both, more present, than the physical landscape, louder than the view. The sound brought a change to my vision, landscape

disappeared into sound, was absorbed by it, becoming tough to focus on yet present in all its beauty sinking unnoticeably into the deepest layers of my mind. Without the noise, without the rhythm of the train and conversations, the landscape is not moving – not experienced, it is not affective, just like a silent movie, soundless landscape is an emotionless narrative; I am almost confident that it would be very difficult for me to tell, to imagine and dream a landscape that was not experienced in some way also through an audible medium. What the sound adds to it is a pulse which mere image cannot provide, a pulse, which ascertains that the landscape is not just there, that you are not just there: you are actually happening, you are alive.

The next paragraph of this chapter will be conveying the landscape I also experienced mainly while *listening*, mostly to the rhythm of the conversations that actually happened, but which are also dreamed up through the works of my memory and imagination. The text below is the Trans-Siberian landscape I crafted inspired by my dream, the Trans-Siberian landscape that emerged and expanded in words, in sentences which encompass the conversations, the voices, facial expressions and hand movements, sounds and silences, it is about the landscape which surrounded me through my journey not only as a view but also as something which was told to me, something I could experience with my eyes closed as it flew in front of me as a dreamy texture of its audible presence.



## **The Dreams of the Siberian Landscape**

### **The Girl**

To travel to Moscow, I took an overnight train from Riga. There was a Mongolian girl in my carriage: young, very pretty and silent, she was wearing a traditional jacket which separated her out of a conventionally dressed crowd on the train. But then, when the carriage full of completely drunk men and loud tipsy women drifted into sleep, I saw her standing up almost as she was programmed to do so and disappearing into the corridor then minutes later she started playing Jews harp in the smoking cabin. I was sure she was taking me to, and already through Siberia, me alone – as nobody else seemed to listen, and in the deadly silence of an overnight train it was just her and me, and the awkward hypnotising sounds of *hel khaar*. We had a conversation, or rather she told me and I could not help but listen: she told me about the ghostly cities of Siberia, dirty early winter snow on the sidewalks, brand new cash withdrawal machines with no banknotes inside, neon sign boards on run down buildings, colourful plastic bead necklaces bearing almost unnoticeable Jesus swinging down from the interior mirrors in 40 year old cars, black and white pictures of missing dark-eyed girls hanged along the notices of boxing fights and underground rock concerts, women who all wore tastelessly bright red lipsticks contrasting sharply with the monochrome interior of dated hotels, strong tea in thick glasses with broken edges, the ever changing time, and nights which started at midday – Moscow time, how unbearably long those nights are for a young girl going to meet her fiancé when she nervously relies now only on *solitaire* to answer her the definite yes or no; she told me also about the faces of fair unshaved men unchanging as they drink filling up the shot glasses with vodka in the open carriage of the Trans-Siberian train and talk about the land,

and the politics and about how people are scared to fly over Siberia because you just never know in Russia if there is enough fuel in the tank or if it is the right kind of fuel, *they* up there in the government offices do not care about local flights connecting Irkutsk and Moscow, Moscow and Vladivostok, Vladivostok and Kharkov; she described the dozen of tired labourers heading home after weeks in taiga's most dense woodlands tell each other stories about the hunt for the white truffle and how the luckiest of them got fairy tale rich, oh this luck they swear on it, and they continue to swear on their wives and their children and this bloody train which is so incredibly slow they can count, if they please, all the birch trees of Siberia passing by, one by one, hey, attendant, pour us some more tea, more tea for us. And here the attendant comes, glass of tea in each hand and he looks a bit like Salvador Dali with his moustache and his mischievous grin, he tells the labourers to keep quiet, to keep quiet because there are children sleeping two bunks down in the carriage and the lights will go out soon, lights go out, and the train beats dark and quiet through the taiga. The girl played, and I went through every inch of Siberia, and every inch of Siberia went through me. I was invaded and estranged, taken apart and put together again by the vicious sound of the instrument to which I could not help but listen, I stared at the dark ceiling of the carriage gripped with fear as I suddenly realised my vulnerability as the sound entered vast hollow space opening in my chest, and it was repeating and repeating in the same monotonic manner the sound which then slowly formed into somewhat understandable message in my head and it was one and the only thing I needed to know about Siberia: you are a complete stranger it echoed, you are a complete stranger – I was a complete stranger, and me being a stranger was the most obvious thing in this landscape which ceased to change for decades and among people who involuntarily bore

the signs of this stagnation living still in a state of irrationality, fear and fight for survival, leading a rustic, plain, physically difficult life. And there, approaching Moscow 6 o'clock in the morning on the train from Riga I was not encountering anything. I was encountered, throughout the whole journey I was that expanding new territory which absorbed and mapped within myself the sounds and the images, the faces and the words, the movements and the stillness of the other, and it is only this landscape that can now be projected in the lines of this and every chapter of this work: the Siberia that only I could see, understand and interpret. *The Siberia that only I can write about.*

### **The Bread Sellers**

When I get out of the train in the cold, foggy morning of Siberian autumn, the air wears scent of the machine oil, laced with the tension of rush, besotted of waiting for arrivals and departures, so thick and heavy I am caught in its sticky substance like a fly in a fly catcher, unable to orientate myself within this 10 minute break on the platform of the small station. I find my gaze fixed on the distant line of the mountains on the horizon, following the curve of railway disappearing in the fog and then my hands gently but firmly, almost as if they were trying to hold onto something for me not to disappear completely, stop a little boy who surfaces out of nowhere and rushes by with a large pile of newspapers in his hands. He looks at me his eyes widened with the mistrust and suspicion as if he knew I did not want the newspaper. With the paper under my arm and three boxes of matches he also sells me, I thank him, he grins with the two front half grown adult teeth showing from underneath his thin upper lip, and I have to stop myself from stroking his yellow thin hair. Having five more minutes to waste I rest myself on the old wooden bench and light up a cigarette

with the matches I bought. On the very similar bench, Lev Tolstoy caught, deliberately, they say, his deadly cold at the provincial train station of Astapovo in the late autumn of 1920. He then stayed in the house of the stationmaster, who opened his home to Tolstoy, allowing the suffering writer to rest. Tolstoy died there shortly after. Feeling his time closing in he escaped the cosiness of his home to die in the train station, under the influence of morphine, in a half dream state, above and beyond it all, just like his very own Anna Karenina. Now sitting on the bench in the middle of Siberia with the cigarette between my two freezing fingers observing the routine of passenger ticketing starting at the entrance of each carriage, I think I can understand completely why one would want to die in the train station. The departure is just so much easier in here. The train station has the sharpened feel of the continuity of the world without you, here you are unnecessary and unimportant, and temporary in the world, which was there before you, and will go on after you had gone without the slightest dysfunction or grief due to your absence. It must be possible for the senses of belonging and regret to completely abandon you on the platform of the train station.

The train station is the place where I came face to face with the Trans-Siberian landscape during my journey. I cannot remember which one it was, and in this case it really does not matter, but if landscape can have a face, if it can reflect itself like in the mirror or on canvas on the fragile texture of human skin, that woman's face was the landscape. She had pale slightly yellow skin framed in white hair with black patches, two very deep wrinkles running down from the corners of her watery bright eyes like the two great rivers of Siberia, Lena and Yenisei – making her look very old and serene, yet alive and wise, and almost unearthly. I saw a face like that in Addis Ababa once, the face that just like this

one wore the soil and the skies, and the human of the land as comfortably as its own beautiful skin. The face in which the whole story and every story of the land had been written in the astonishing ornaments of the wrinkles again and again, and again, until it became unreadable – just felt: sheer, all undermining power of concentrated meaning. You can only identify and be captivated by a face like that, when it poses at you a complete and total otherness, something which in the split of the second strips you of all your identities and knowledge and you are lost to the point of being threatened by the fact that you will never ever be able to understand the true source of its beauty, that you bear no significance in the flesh of this land what so ever, and you will never be written into that beautiful skin to alter its surface by one single line.

I bought bread from these women on one of the first short stops on Trans-Siberian, tasteless white bread that crumbled in your hands like it was made of sand when taken out of its cling film wrapping. I bought bread at every station when the train stopped daytime, always from different women pleased every time with the sincere excitement in the way they offered it to me as it was, and it was a piece of their home, and their work and their struggle. Eating that bread, it seemed to me then and even more so now, was the closest I could get to the essence of that land, accepting the bland product of the crops and the hands it grown, experiencing the difference in taste, colour and texture. Throughout the journey the taste of bread I bought did not change, neither did the women, they all waited patiently on the platform for train to arrive, and they continued to sit there when the train was leaving, waiting for another one, and then another and another. There was unchanging monotonic continuity embedded in that waiting just like in the plains of the landscape that rolled outside the windows of the moving train between stations. I cannot remember anything else about these

women, all of them has now the face of that first one, with surface of unendurable taiga engraved on her skin, not even remotely beautiful but strikingly memorable and vivid image of the land, embodiment of living and becoming it.

### **The Bride**

Aliona, nearly twenty, engaged and to be married next summer. "I have not seen him for two years", she says, and mixes a pile of cards in her hands for maybe the tenth time: I can hardly follow the movement as she is very quick, and it fascinates me those small fragile hands of hers shuffling cards so effortlessly and confidently. The game is simple. It is called Patience, *pasjans*, she calls it. The aim is to eliminate all the cards except aces in the pile. If in the end of the game she is left with four aces it is a yes, it is positive. Very childish, she admits, but it helps with the waiting. That is what she has been doing for the last two years. Her twenty-one-year-old fiancé served in the navy for two years, and she has been playing cards in the kitchen of her parents' house, her two little sisters watching: "evenings are long in my village". Winters are long in Siberia. Those rare moments she stops to shuffle the cards she plays with her plain engagement ring which is a tiny bit too big, so she says without lifting her eyes off it. She is going to meet him in Vladivostok; they agreed that he will meet her at the station. He lost a finger, she adds out of a sudden, the wedding ring finger. How? She does not know as he is not good at talking, especially about feelings, the pain and the love and all those things in between, he is one of those quiet types, do I know those quiet types? I nod. I do. She lifts her huge dark eyes from the cards and asks me if I have a question as she can ask the

cards, but it has to be a yes or no question, of course. I say I do not have anything to ask. Not even about somebody's feelings? Not even about somebody's feelings, I smile sincerely as we meet each other here for the first time, the last pansy of summer and the first frost of September. I am asking cards if he loves me, still loves me, she blushes when I inquire and I blush a bit with her. Well, don't you know? I have not seen him for two years, she answers quietly. And you never know with the quiet types. You never know if you are not talking, she explains with some unexpected seriousness, you never know without words, as in silence you only hear yourself. She reads poetry, but mostly just Pushkin. He is in all the school books, well at least in Russia he is. Do I know him? Not my favourite. I like Yesenin. Godless idiot, she whispers, he hung himself at 30. But I know the story all too well; Yesenin was one my teenage crushes: perfect combination of a handsome man, painfully beautiful poetry and a dramatically unhappy ending. His picture was pinned on the back of my literature notebook alongside that of Kurt Cobain and scribbles of the quotes from both of their lyrics. I smile at her and she smiles at me: she has not ever heard of Nirvana and it is all paused for a while. So where are you going, she asks. You are going to Baikal? It is beautiful Baikal - but it's too big. The Siberia is better in small places, where you almost do not know where you are because you could be anywhere, like her village, and she tells me I should visit. No, the train does not stop there, it is too small, but it is not far from the railway as sometimes, at nights which are really quiet in taiga you can hear the train rumbling like a thunder, and you never now really if it is a thunder or a train. She thinks you can hear train everywhere in Siberia. Tell me more about your village. She stops mixing cards. Puts them in front of her, turns her engagement ring around her finger a few times and reaches for her tea. I notice now that her

skin is very pale and transparent; I can see the net of blue lines of veins clearly. Like any other small village in Siberia it is all wooden houses, some very old, painted in green and blue mostly. She likes wooden houses and she does not understand why people started to prefer bricks. Comes with a bit of money, her grandfather says, this love for the bricks. The wooden houses... you cannot take life out of them – the tree when cut and becomes a part of the wooden house it continues to live, go old and rotten in the end, and it dies as the house crumbles but it is never really dead before it is gone completely just like a human being. It is also her grandfather who says it, he's one of the oldest in the village – his father, her grand grandfather, was there before the train. Do you measure time like that, I ask, before and after the train? Time? She shrugs her shoulders as if I have just mentioned something utterly meaningless to her. I don't think there are many left of those who have been there before the train. If somebody from your family has been there before the train it means you are a real Siberian; it means you belong, you are rooted...and that you are less likely to leave. We sit quietly for a good ten minutes just listening to the train. Then she tells me about communal sauna, *banya*, where you heat yourself to the point of the insanity and jump into the ice water, and how your body feels weightless for the first few seconds in there: every village has one. And every village has drunks, who drink because they can't work and they can't work because there are no jobs, and then she smiles, more helplessly than sadly, and this is the kind of a smile I have only ever seen in Russia. But best of all, she starts again, without me asking, there are carpets and carpets of blueberries in late summer, and they are, she's not exaggerating, a size of a coin and the most waited treat of a year for the village kids, *vareniki*, sweet blueberry dumplings in a thin pastry generously laced with melted butter and



dusted with sugar, disappearing in your mouth. The winters are long and freezing, but things continue to grow, babies are born, life happens and Baikal will not tell you, because Baikal is an eternity and one Siberian life does not last that long. The whole village of wooden houses does not last that long. Before I leave that evening back to my bunk my mouth bitter with the taste of the strong tea, we drank all night I ask her what is the name of her fiancée. Ivan, Ivanushka, I can most certainly hear motherly warmth in her voice, you know, the name that is given to all the blond blue-eyed village idiots in the traditional Russian fairy tales. My loud laughter causes irritated mumbling in the nearby bunks so I lean towards her and whisper that I know, and that things usually turn out really well for them in the end.

## **Baikal**

Just as the sky over Irkutsk starts to brighten up slightly I spot him outside my hotel in his black warm coat, which appears to be too tight for his big humpty figure. It is 2 am in the afternoon, and I need to get to and back from Baikal before dark. "I will take you, 5000 rubbles, after all, its 68 kilometres one way" smiles the toothless mouth of Zaur, the taxi driver. My glance wanders involuntarily to the pastel green bead necklace with broken crucifix hung on the interior mirror in his ancient *Lada* – our neighbour had one in orangey yellow back in 80's Lithuania, he used to clean it thoroughly every Sunday in the yard paying a particular attention to its luxurious leather seats as all the neighbourhood kids gathered around. I rode in it once on an emergency trip to a nearby hospital when I burned my both feet running over a campfire; I cried quietly alongside my worried mother on the backseats of that pampered brown leather gripped with pain and fear that I will never be able to walk again. "There

and back?" I ask and he nods happily sensing that he's landed himself a deal of a decade, "Tourists are scarce in the winter months" he adds, struggling to open the back door of his car to seat me – "I am not a tourist". But I had to see Baikal. Siberia's Baikal, one of its legends growing by few inches every year and exceeding the average planet lake's age expectancy by hundreds of millions of years. It seems though that it survives sucking the life out of its land and its people: average man in the region is expected to reach 53, the growth season lasts about 2 months and the passenger train stops here, in Irkutsk, its closest major city, once a day. "So you have been to Baikal before?" another toothless smile. I shake my head, and we set down the nameless street of my hotel across rows of spectacular colourful wooden houses with facades decorated with carvings and thread work, beautifully engraved window shutters reminding me of illustrations in the Russian fairy tale books that belonged to my mother at my grandmother's house. We slowly pass huge bronze statue of Lenin in the city centre square. The day it was removed from the square in my hometown I sat on my father's shoulders overlooking hundreds of heads of sobbing women and chanting men as the crane lifted up and swung a dangerously heavy now only unwanted decoration in front of the ecstatic crowd. My melting ice cream was dripping into my father's then thick black hair, it was 23rd of August 1991, I was nearly seven and about to start school. My both feet were completely healed. I don't know if it is the statue of Lenin that made the square feel the same, exactly the same, in a sense that it could have perfectly been the square from my childhood. As we stop at the traffic lights I spot freshly laid red flowers beneath it and there is suddenly the air of the materially embodied presence of something which was in reality gone a long time ago, healed unnoticed just like my burned feet, faded away: my childhood and the

statue of Lenin in my home city. Zaur asks me if I would like to see the famous Spasskaya Church as we are in the centre: no, thanks, just Baikal. As you wish. He lights up a filterless cigarette and I feel his dark Caucasian eyes in the mirror crawling on me like two huge autumn flies. Tourists don't come back then, I ask? To Siberia? He shakes his head; laughs and speeds up as we leave the city of Irkutsk and go onto incredibly straight new dual carriageway. "You people, going to Baikal, are always alone, you come one by one, Americans! " he speaks while searching for a radio station and before I can explain that I am not an American he shouts: "All the waves cut short here, all the waves cut short!" and switches the radio off with an apparent annoyance. He is a bit tempered; he is from Baku, he's not local "You can't get used to Siberia, you can't get used to it, but then you do", and he sighs. The carriageway goes up and down hills. I ask for his age, and he shrugs in his tight coat uncomfortably. "Forty-eight, I'm old", he replies and adds immediately "I have five children, five boys like birch trees". They are working in the taiga, in the woods all five of them, it is real money, but families suffer, he explains. His eldest grandson's lungs are weak, since birth, Zaur's wrist is about the size of his waist, he shows me letting the steering wheel go completely, and Siberia with this climate and that silly big headed daughter in law of his makes it all worse, what a waste of a boy! Suddenly with a joy and excitement which almost does not suit him, he points at the distant patches of dark blue water emerging through the thickness of leafless trees – Baikal! We are driving alongside the lake. My attempts to open the window are fruitless. Zaur manages to open his and with gusts of cold fresh air the hauling of the engine fills up the interior of the car and we cannot hear each other anymore. He drives me to a place where "everybody goes", sort of little marina and we agree to meet in few

hours' time: I see him sliding into one of the awfully ran down hut size bars across the road. Left alone with Baikal I feel intimidated as there's nobody else in sight. Suddenly a small white yacht separates from the marina and roars into the blue of the lake, turns a few large circles around, and then goes further and disappears I seem not to be able to understand where to. The lake appears to be a part of the sky rather than that of the land, but out of the carriage everything seems to have different proportions, the lines seem to merge more easily as if you are thrown out of the warm womb of the carriage to experience the vibrant world fresh, sharp, anew and just for that new-born while a bit blurred. The amount of oxygen is head spinning – I can almost taste the water in the air, my lungs pleasantly ache as I breathe in and out loudly walking by the shore. It is a bit like drowning; water of Baikal slowly inhabits me.

Zaur approaches me breathless, asking if I would like to go now: have you had some water? He says all tourists drink it, most of them (oh, those halfwits), as the water is believed to have some rejuvenating power. "Fairy tales, fairy tales", and he laughs an old man's laugh ending in a long fit of a cough but continues to walk swiftly beside me. The car starts from the third time, he drives slowly, and I gaze upon Baikal: he managed to find a radio station now, and the views are accompanied by the local news read in annoyingly monotonic female voice. I want to take a few pictures here; I pat on Zaur's shoulder as he is so immersed in the news he does not hear me asking to stop. Finally, he hears me, swears, pulls over, goes back a bit, and I get out of the car and then across the road. A moment later I turn around to take a picture of Zaur waiting for me next to his vehicle. He reacts, and in the blink of an eye, almost instinctively as if I was attacking him, he reaches into an inner pocket of his now unbuttoned coat, gets out his cell phone and takes a picture of me.



**Figure 12 Zaur photographing me**

On my return to the car, just before I sit back in, I ask him why he did that. "Why did you do that?" he throws it back at me angrily. Just in case, I reply half-jokingly, if I never came back, and we never met again, for a memory. "Same here", he answers and then asks me for a cigarette, rips the filter away, smokes it slowly with the strange enjoyment gazing over the darkening Baikal and the lonely dried out birch tree on the cliff I wanted to photograph, and then drives me back to the city of Irkutsk on the new dual carriageway, up and down the hills, through taiga, through the blindness of a complete wordlessness.



## CONCLUSION

Often your own ageing seems most apparent through objects. The notebook I took to Siberia for my records is now worn from moves we had over the 5 years, from me looking through it, from storage on the shelf with my books and journals, reminding me that I too would have changed by now, and it is only Siberia to surface and essence of which this period of time would have done nothing. It is still a lonely, incredibly vast, empty land. But if I went there now, if I was to journey through that beautiful taiga again, things would seem different: the rhythm of the train, the faces and words of the people, the taste of the bread and the rolling land itself as I am no longer able to see as I did five years ago. So really, the land I have written about in this work, *that Siberia*, does not exist anymore, it came into being and then passed – this text is the only realm in which it can be still found. In October 2011 I travelled to Moscow without having booked my Trans-Siberian train tickets in advance, I remember walking into a momentous building of the Yersolavsky train station, one of the most impressive railway stations in the world, my heart pumping so hard that I could hear it echoing in my head. How uncomfortable that space was, its intimidating high ceiling and a strange hive like humming buzz of an adverse crowd filling that enormous hollowness of a massive building with the tension of waiting, departures and arrivals, separations and reunions. It is amazing how much relief and comfort I found at the sight of my train ticket when it was finally pushed towards me through a narrow hole in a plastic screen between me and a smiling cashier: my train was departing in four hours, my first night on the Trans-Siberian was approaching, and while eating sour Russian borsch with a slice of black dry bread in the station's dated canteen I realised clearly for the

very first time the absurdity of my intention to absorb and to contain it all under premeditated headlines I worked out in a previous year while preparing for the trip. It took its time for me to realise that the vastness of Siberia had to be interpreted to become meaningful; it needed to be subtitled in some way to cease being an ungraspable spirit of an impressive landmass, it needed to be transformed into a source of dreams, imaginations, memories and finally narratives – for every spirit requires a form, or perhaps multiple forms, to continue among people, to make sense. So here, five years since I started my journey, I am surprised and delighted and perhaps even a little bit frightened by the confidence of my voice. That is how I changed, how this journey and the process of writing this work have changed me. And still, I do not know how to conclude this thesis; it is incredibly difficult to conclude a piece of work that has taken one sixth of my life to complete.

At some point of writing this thesis Siberia ceased to be a land outside the train window, I know I kept on repeating it in every chapter, but it really stopped being a land I crossed, a land – my two week journey from Moscow to Vladivostok. When? It is hard to tell how and when one starts to travel, but one determining factor of the way I travelled both through Siberia and through my thesis is that I did so being in love with Siberia, with the Trans-Siberian, with the idea of it. I travelled and wrote about it trapped in that amazing bubble of excitement and out of this world feeling one experiences during the very first stages of relationship, and there can be no doubt that when I travelled and what I wrote is all for, about and within my beloved, it is almost, well at least in some sense, a huge weird shaped love letter.

Five years is a long time for human, long processes become a part of one's life, integrate and continue to be also written on the lines of everydayness. It is very



difficult to conclude a work that ceased to be something only present on paper in front of you, a work that transformed into being one of your senses: a lens through which you have re-realized the whole of your world. Conclusions are important, they allow us endings, so we can begin again, but can one conclude a feeling, can one conclude a memory? Perhaps it is only possible to extend it, leave it open, and allow for continuity to take it further, ahead of that very last full stop.

Just as every time through this thesis when troubled, I reach out again for the saviour moment of the past. *Saviour moment* is what I call a moment of emergence of a meaningful standpoint enabling you to move forward with your text. Explaining it simply, and looking at it from a perspective of my five year's work I find that writing this thesis resembles a task of the dot to dot worksheet where one connects numbers or letters in sequential order to make up a picture to be revealed at the end. The complication occurs when you cannot find the dot to go to next, it is not clearly marked and/or you fail to locate it, and in almost angry moment of frustration you then end up creating your own, connecting to it and then, eventually, there comes one more, and you feel freed, encouraged by your creative ability and sense that by connecting the dots that were not there when you started and abandoning the ones that no longer fit in, you might have come up with unplanned, probably a bit ill structured, but regardless a more complete picture. My memories, my dots, were placed within my text when I got lost in telling the journey as it happened, as I documented/experienced it, they emerged effortlessly as if they have already been there awaiting to be written, revealed and connected. With the introduction of the first memory into my text, the linear time of my telling was hijacked, and I found unusual comfort in the availability of such escape. The discovery of the

vividness of the memories lurking there to be written, the memories which seemed to come fully realised in the most intense detail allowed me to detour in pleasure personifying the experiences of the Trans-Siberian. And in these detours, I often found that I drifted so far away from the Trans-Siberian that it became another journey all together. In a way this is at the core of thesis – it is about how one journey becomes two, about the different dimensions one can travel within, about how all our journeys are essentially journeys inwards towards ourselves and our becoming.

So here is the last one, the last memory for my conclusion chapter, last dot completing the picture, my very first childhood memory...

*My grandfather holds me in his arms; the room is warm and full of light. With one hand he reaches out and opens the white transparent curtain, and I can see now the garden: my young mother and father, my teenage aunts and my grandmother are picking cherries. Large white plastic bowls in their hands are full of ripe fruit. He extends his hand and points to my mother; she sees it, smiles and waves at me. He holds me tight; I can feel his firm, gentle palm stroking my back. It is comforting. Then he leaves the window, places me on the sofa with a dark woollen cover: I feel that surface with my fingers, the roughness of the finely knitted wool. I see then how he slowly walks across the sunlit room and takes violin from the upper shelf in the corner. The case clicks and opens, and the violin is wrapped in a dark blue satin cloth. He carefully places it on his shoulder and starts playing. This memory is silent. I cannot hear anything; I just see his fingers jumping on the strings and follow the fascinating rhythmic movement of the bow. I am 10 months old. Can I really remember it?*

My grandfather died 3 months later. The cherries died ten years later; I remember a truckload of dried out black branches being taken away one spring. They were replaced by the straight rows of evergreen trees. They formed a hedge that now protects the house from the noise and sights of the street. Very rarely when I visit I go and open my grandfather's violin's case, the sight of the blue satin cloth is somehow like the sight of his face, and I do not remember his face – I only know how he looked like because I have seen his photographs. For a moment I am every time struck by that almost human warmth of the satin material. I then carefully take the violin out and touch the strings with my fingertips. I long to hear the sound of it. This year I enrolled my son into violin classes. He is starting in September. The memory will transform and take different shape in the present, will come alive, anew, in the hands of my son, through the strings that are only silent when untouched something else will be created, a meaningful connection or a new signifying post. And maybe it will not be created, but I want to imagine it will. This vision is comforting. And here is where this thesis finds me now when I am about to write the final lines of it: comforted, witnessing the birth of and embracing with pleasure the inner harmony, almost guidance, I found through the extraordinary works of memory.

It seems now that the whole five years I have been stripping words from myself, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter, memory by memory just to get to the core, this last one, the first recognizable image of my grandfather in my mind, which holds in its tight knot the strings of all my beginnings and journeys. That is where I started and it is probably true to say that through this work I became haunted by my recollections, welcoming the day dream like presence of past and unfolding meanings of it. In a way this whole work is a non-linear assortment of various personal memories that somehow lend meaning to my

everyday existence, in fact, to the whole of my existence and to the existence of people and things around me. But through the experiences of the inner, monitoring and detailing the experiences of the personal, the world of my memory, I ended up, acknowledging that there was little conscious intention to, describing the world inhabited by the reader too, by touching and feeling through the universal themes of loneliness, maturing, creativity, escape and becoming. Therefore I propose that the routes of my memory, episodic glimpses of my past when seen as thematic designs, constitute my personal journey but also the outside world, the world of the reader. The geography written in this work is constituted in some way of time and space travelling, it works through and connects key “poetics of space”: train carriages, my childhood home, my study, the bus, taking me through rural Wiltshire, charity office and many others. It is a geography about returning to one’s past through dreams, desires and glimpses of memory and participating again in the surroundings and emotion of one’s childhood and young adulthood, rediscovering and cherishing, celebrating the blissful impermanence of the past world and past oneself. It is probably right to say that this work is an ethnographic fiction, increasingly popular among cultural geographers, and described as an attempt “to evoke cultural experience and sense of place using literary techniques to craft conventional ethnographic materials—interviews, participant observation, field notes, photographs—into a compelling story” (Jacobson and Larson, 2014:179). Almost all the text you have gone through is a subjective reflection which embraces and enjoys the creative form of telling, offering the reader experience of what Lorimer and Parr (2014) call “engaging the full range of human sensibility” (pp. 544). My work will find itself comfortably among one of those non-representational accounts in human geography exploring the role of memory in our spatial surroundings, the

effect remembering has on the way we move through and interpret the present and ourselves.

As I have already outlined in my methodology chapter, autobiography has got a place within human geography, and as Moss (2001) claims has been glossed by geographers in their somewhat obvious neglect to name autobiography as a direct method in “data collection” and/or analysis, she further writes that “self-scrutiny, individual and collective can contribute to a better understanding of and provide clearer insight into who we are and where our world has come from” (p.9). What my thesis documents, I believe, is a gradual change in one’s approach to the original idea brought by increasing realisation of not only the multiple ways of seeing and understanding as the work expands and continues, but also expressing. It documents the process of acquiring a certain position and voice one feels most comfortable speaking in, which in my case has not only changed the form but also the meaning of the whole thesis. My thesis is deeply felt, it is personal, it *has become personal*, therefore as well as providing the account of journeying through Siberia on the rail, and it also offers an insight into how this journeying comes to be. I almost deliberately allow the reader to know me, a thirty year old Lithuanian, a mother, working in small charity office in rural Wiltshire, I let him/her to glimpse into my childhood, youth, adulthood, every day, my sensibilities, my regrets and fears, and inevitably the struggles of writing this work. Lorimer (2005) refers to it as a creation of a new space of being in writing where the affective capacities of representation emerges and evokes a “more than representational” geographies, where the focus is “on how life takes shape and gains expression”. Finally, it is a beautiful process to go through, not without its pitfalls and frustrations, but at the end it feels like the original idea of documenting the people, rhythms, landscapes throughout the

Trans-Siberian railway journey and the detours to my personal memories it triggered have fused together in a somehow brightened, meaningful semantic recreation. Contemporary geography is keenly engaging into research, which attempts to understand the role of individual memory in approaching and interpreting landscapes, addressing the performative and affective at increasingly personal level. I would like to think that my thesis contributes to the explorations of those human geographers concerned with how the personal, when embraced, enters and alters the research, how it contributes and how it perhaps takes away, touching on the ever probed question of representation in human geography. All the reader has to do is to accept and undertake the viewing of the world the way I see it, and engage and enjoy this work not thinking about the theoretical background it is, in all honesty, probably lacking, but discovering various aspects of feeling, the words, the sentences, the descriptions of journeying through Siberia, in which that feeling resides.

I shared my fears of immersing into my own world and not being able to actually produce a piece of work that touches the realities of other people with an old friend who I have known since my first year at high school and who bore a lot of my email anxieties over the years, often without commenting on them. I was writing About the Rhythms chapter with an episode about my piano lessons when I sent her this: “ You asked me how the writing is going: it is going well. You know it is easy for me just let my fingers go, and the keyboard feels almost like an instrument and text flows like music – it is sometimes so intensely fluid that I cannot bring myself to break putting a comma or a full stop. Some kind of drift off, a pure enjoyment of the process of writing, do you know what I mean? Then I read it. Again and again, it feels a bit like a chaotic mess that can be only dear and meaningful to me and me alone, there are too much disjointed,

multiple, fragments of myself in that work. And that scares me, but that fear is so similar to the fear of falling you experience as a child on a swing: it is so mixed up with excitement and pleasure that you discard it and keep on going". And after all like anyone who had spent five years working very intensely patching together a text, I want to believe that my work is important, that it is meaningful, not universally perhaps, but to a certain group of people, to a small audience at least which is open to acknowledging not only the contribution of the themes my work evolves around but also the importance of the way it is written. As I wrote previously in my methodology chapter, I organized the thesis on the spine of my Trans-Siberian journey, two weeks I spent on the train in October 2011, the chapter headlines *About Community, About Rhythms, About Memory and Imagination, and About Landscape* bears my original idea at the beginning of this work: to write about the experiences on the train, through the train, my own experiences and experiences of others – as I have seen and documented it. And although some of that Siberia I set out to write about is still present in my work, inside the chapters at the centre of it all, smoother and more daringly the further it goes and kind of evolves, the whole work becomes concerned mostly with of how the time flows through one's consciousness and how one makes sense of it. It's a journey of entering emotional and spiritual maturity, gaining ability to connect and meaningfully absorb the outside experiences through the personal, inner, developing a kind of individualism, a sense of a self-ownership, which then continues to pervade the whole work. Through this work I developed an understanding of maturity as reaching the point where ones past becomes as important as ones future, a sort of saturation point where every new experience can be in some way referenced to your past, to the various excerpts from ones memory. Maturity enables you to recognise

these “referencing” moments and connect to them meaningfully. Maturing one gains means to accept the fact that experiencing something completely new is impossible and experiencing something a-new is the only exciting possibility: re-imagining, reliving, and remembering. Remembering, especially, remembering and moving forward with the weight of the memory affecting your day to day encounters in a series of different ways. For the reader, essentially, this work is entering someone’s wholly subjective, egocentric world and requires the ability and foremost an effort to see beyond the plot in order to illuminate the broader themes which I believe I touched. It is seeing the Trans-Siberian journey, the landscape, its people, rhythms and opportunities for imagining with and through the sensibilities and backload of memories I propose one to inherit from me for this reading exercise.

I have read through my initial proposal a few days ago. It felt almost like another person – *me-five-years-ago*, wrote it. My thesis is miles away from the experiences I set off to write about then, in 2010. The Trans-Siberian train has a completely different presence in it, it is not eliminated, but my thesis at some point in the writing process ceased to be about the train. I will try to explain using a picture of a sand Mandala being created by Tibet monks, shown below.





**Figure 13 Tibetan Buddhist Monks sand art (2016).** Available at: <http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/tibetan-buddhist-monks-sand-art>

Tibetan art of *dul-tson-kyil-khor*, which literally means "mandala of coloured powders" is a process during which millions of grains of sand, using special metal rods inducing vibration and allowing sand flow like a liquid, are painstakingly laid into place on a flat platform over a period of days or weeks. Mandalas can have various meanings, but generally, they are meant to guide the individual to the path of enlightenment, while laying the sand monks chant to evoke the energies of the divine. Once the mandala is completed, it is almost immediately dismantled. The sand is swept up, losing its colourfulness, to symbolise the impermanence of existence. Half of the sand is placed in an urn, and the other half is distributed among the audience as a blessing for personal healing. The half in the urn is taken to the nearest river and poured into symbolise the spread of the mandala's healing energies. Before the monks start laying the sand, they have to prepare the mandala base: a solid wooden board on which mandala is drawn. The base disappears under the colourful sand, and

is not to be part of any of the further rituals, but without it, the whole work would be impossible. Trans-Siberian train taking me through Siberian landscape is the base of my mandala, a bleak frame. The rest, the words that covered it, is the colourful sand of my memory coming together to a picture of healing through painstakingly lonely work of many months.

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