Chekhov’s *Sakhalin Island* as Environmental Humanism
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A 350-page study of the penal colonies on Sakhalin, Chekhov’s *Sakhalin Island* foregrounds the effects of the island’s geography, ecology, and administrative practices on the island’s inhabitants. While Chekhov’s interest in the intersection of human and environment is clear throughout, the question of *Sakhalin Island*’s genre preoccupies Anglophone criticism on the work. On the one hand, Cathy Popkin argues Sakhalin and its inhabitants are simply too disordered to comprehend, catalog, or study, which leads Chekhov into an epistemological crisis. The crisis is reflected in the work’s resistance to classification. On the other hand, Conevery Valencius argues that *Sakhalin Island* is a work of *medical geography*, a genre emerging with the more geographic form of epidemiology that arose in 19th century Europe in response to persistent cholera outbreaks. But fully maintaining Popkin’s or Valencius’ position eclipses either the scientific and objective, or the uniquely humanist and subjective aspect of the study. To offer a balanced reading of the work I argue that Chekhov writes from a position of *environmental humanism*, a category that harkens back to ancient philosophical approaches to theorizing the relation between humans and the natural world. In *Sakhalin Island* readers find Chekhov drawn to articulate a dialectic between human activity and the environment: people and place mutually influence each other, which Chekhov captures through careful vacillation between subjective and objective modes of narration. Though rejected as a dissertation proposal in the 1890s, contemporary ethnographers and epidemiologists both claim the work as a disciplinary model.