Sensuous Nostalgia:
Insecurity in the Borderlands of the Fergana Valley

Asel Murzakulova

Between 1999 and 2010, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan militarized their borders while destroying shared infrastructure and creating new ones in the process. Fence lines, observation towers, ditches, border outposts and land laced with anti-personnel mines appeared along a stretch of 1,170 kilometres of the Fergana Valley.[1] Border villages were gradually transformed into insecure spaces. As one of my interlocutors whom I interviewed in 2017 described: "Previously there were no border guards here and you could travel safely. Now the border guards can stop and interrogate me... I always feel really tense when I cross the bridge at the border and try to get across faster."

During my field trips, I visited the ruins of various border-crossing points. One of them remains intact even though it has not been functional since 2005, when Uzbekistan closed its border with Kyrgyzstan during the Andijan Events – violent anti-government protests in Uzbekistan. Before the border was shut down, thousands of people moved through the crossing point every day, with a constant around-the-clock hubbub. When taking a photo while on the bridge, I had a mixed sense of anxiety from being in an iron box with only one way out and vulnerable to possible surveillance by soldiers from a nearby observation tower. The murmur of the river below – a sound that is often

associated with calmness and serenity – felt unfamiliar in this place. Here, border securitization has changed the very soundscape of infrastructure.

One of the largest border-crossing bridges, now closed, between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the city of Kara-Suu, Osh Province, Kyrgyzstan.
Photo: Asel Murzakulova, 2021.

Nick Megoran (2017) shows that in the Fergana Valley, the spatialization of the new nation-states Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan led to the destruction of villages that had uncertain status in terms of territorial sovereignty. In other parts of the valley, the continual construction of 'independent roads' (*nezavisimye joldor* in the mix of Russian and Kyrgyz used locally, or *koz karandysyz joldor* in straight Kyrgyz) designed to bypass the neighbouring state's territory produced a sense of "infrastructural hope" that promises a secure border life for some, but growing uncertainty and fragility for others (Reeves 2017). Along the Central Asian borders with China, new transborder bazaars developed, capturing the spirit of entrepreneurship while assuring alternative sources of livelihood (Alff 2016). This article draws attention to the less researched, sensuous dimensions of infrastructural transformations in the post-socialist period. I indicate how infrastructural changes, including militarization of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, have led to the obliteration of local village life, and with it the loss of an everyday sensorium that was connected to a perception of Soviet-era security. I argue that these colossal infrastructural changes, as part of border securitization, evoke a special type of sensuous nostalgia for the sensory experiences connected to the pre-border past. Sensuous nostalgia has its own set of sensory referents, including the noise of crowded spaces of mobility, like at railway stations, the feel of a cool breeze under the shade of trees, and the soundscapes associated with rural sociality,

such as the crowing of roosters. These nostalgic sensations are associated with a once-peaceful and predictable life, in contrast to new border materializations that have created insecure spaces marked by the novel and less desirable sensations of militarized infrastructures.

In November 2017, during my fieldwork on the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border along the Kara-Darya River I met a middle-aged man named Shukhrat-*aka*.[2] He told me: "Under the Soviet Union everything was held in common, there were no borders! When this whole mess started [the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of the market economy in 1991], everyone just survived as best they could." Shukhrat-*aka* made a living in those days by transporting various goods to sell between the village and the city. "At that time, life at the urban bazaar was thriving – unlike now." The once-bustling, crowded markets emptied out, as did railroad stations, from where Shukhrat-*aka* could formerly travel freely between Osh (Kyrgyzstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Siberian (Russia) cities, which are now separated by state borders. He experienced this narrowing of his mobility through changes in the sensorium, for example the disappearance of certain sounds from now-transborder spaces: solicitations from taxi drivers, offers from cargo porters, shouts of *samsa* and drink vendors – all of which have disappeared from railway soundscapes.[3] Looking at the now vacant buildings, Shukhrat-*aka* spoke of how they used to sound. By referring to the memory of sounds of railway stations, he points to what was lost, even if the material objects continue to exist.

A vacant railway station in Kara-Suu. With border securitization and the restriction of mobility between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, this building is no longer one of the noisiest places in the city. Photo: Asel Murzakulova, 2021.

Shukhrat-*aka*'s family grew rice on their plot of land, and like many villagers, he planted poplar trees around the perimeter of his paddy field: "I purposely planted poplars close to each other so the tree trunk would grow straight and be suitable for building a house for my son when he grew up." Poplars thus cultivated in the valley represent an "infrastructural species" (Carse 2014: 133), as a source of timber for traditional house construction techniques (Kg. *synch*).

Poplars were part of the safe space sensorium. But Shukhrat-aka was forced to fell the trees as part of border securitization measures.
Photo: Asel Murzakulova, 2021.

Then Shukhrat-*aka* was forced to partake in the destruction of his particular sensory world. In summer 2010, some border guards and the village head came to Shukhrat-*aka* with a mandate to fell the perimeter of trees. They blocked the construction of new military infrastructure, he was told. This led to suspicion in the village: "There were rumors that our land would be given away [to Uzbekistan]." He recounted the process of clearing the land: "I took some tools and went with my son to the field. I remember the day well: it was very hot and when the poplars fell, the heat became unbearable." His new sense of vulnerability came from both the political context – the presence of border guards – and the loss of privacy and the protection of shade, exacerbated by the valley's arid climate.

Gradually, the authorities installed concrete posts and barbed wire where the poplars once stood. Shukhrat-*aka* no longer used his land for fear of being detained by border guards. When we returned together to his plot in 2017, the green wall of poplars and the characteristic rustling of their leaves in wind had been replaced by an entirely different sensory experience: that of insecurity and alienation. Border guards routinely inspected the territory along the fence, checking the barbed wire clutches and repairing the ones damaged by summer heat. This infrastructure does not require Shukhrats-*aka*'s care.

The inscription "Fence for sale" (Kg. chek satylat) is to be read with irony in the Fergana Valley borderlands. The word chek can be understood as 'fence', 'land for agricultural use' and 'border'.
Photo: Asel Murzakulova, 2021.

Attention to shifts in border infrastructures and the sensorium enriches the current debate in critical security studies of Central Asia (Kennedy-Pipe 2004; Megoran 2005; Koch 2018; Lemon 2018) by showing how sensuous nostalgia associated with security serves to navigate the new border environment. The feeling of insecurity is experienced as changes to sensory space, for example in the sounds made by dying poplars. The creak of dry trees has replaced the once-rustling leaves in now-abandoned fields around which centered pre-border village life.

Dried out poplars in an abandoned field near the border.
Photo: Asel Murzakulova, 2021.

Uncertainty about future life at the border forced many villagers to move elsewhere. Shukhrat-*aka*'s neighbors left their home in 2016. He reflected nostalgically on rural life through his memory of the sounds of crowing roosters, for him an embodiment of past security. The neighbours gifted him their rooster when they left, a gesture symbolizing the social ties that had once linked them and which now came to a halt.

Nostalgia in post-socialist societies has been explored as a sentiment that helps to make sense of the transformations that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet socialist project while contesting and affirming the new order (Berdahl 1999). The experiences of people in the Fergana Valley develop this understanding of nostalgia by considering the sensuous dimension of the landscape, which shifted from a place of peace and security to a threatening, militarized border that severed social and economic relationships. Sensuous nostalgia here works as an asset to reflect critically on formation of the nation-state and to challenge the 'normalization' of border infrastructure in rural life. When discussing the sensorium of the new border, my interviewees nostalgically recalled the more fluid sensations and experiences of the past, showing the temporal change to infrastructural sensing (Ingold 1993).

Infrastructural transformations related to militarization of the border have radically altered the sensorium of those who live in the Fergana Valley's borderlands today, where the sensing of infrastructure shapes how people navigate safe and unsafe places. Addressing sensuous nostalgia reveals the tension between the perceptions of the valley's inhabitants and what the border infrastructure nominally embodies: local residents actually experience the presence of border guards and an infrastructure designed to ensure security as reflections of social, economic and physical insecurity. Sensuous nostalgia thus draws attention to everyday vulnerability in this region thoroughly transformed by the rise of new borders.

Notes:

[1] Uzbekistan fully demined its borders in the Fergana Valley in 2020.

[2] To preserve anonymity, the name is a pseudonym, as is the name of the village. *Aka* is a respectful appellation for a middle-aged man, usually someone older than oneself.

[3] *Samsa* are traditional baked pastries with meat and onion filling.

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Author:

Asel Murzakulova is a Research Fellow with the University of Central Asia's (UCA) Mountain Societies Research Institute and Co-Founder of the analytical Platform Mongu. Within the AGRUMIG Horizont-2020 team, her current research focuses on rural change and migration in Naryn, Jalal-Abad and Batken regions of Kyrgyzstan. Between 2015 and 2020 she led two UCA research projects on transborder tensions related to water and pasture management in Central Asia. In 2008, she was a visiting scholar at the Davis Center at Harvard University, and in 2013, at the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies at University of California, Berkeley. Her research covers border conflicts, migration, natural resource management and nationalism.

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