

“Post-Soviet Ecopoetics” and “Retroactive Anticolonialism”: Theorising Central Asia’s Decolonial Aesthetics

TAMAR KOPLATADZE¹

¹ University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Abstract. This article introduces two interlinked theoretical concepts through which to analyse decolonial cultural movements in Central Asia (and potentially beyond), especially those concerned with ecocritical themes. It first proposes the conceptual framework of “retroactive anticolonialism” as a marker of the recent turn in Central Asian cultures towards postcolonial revisionism and activism. I argue that this process is distinguished by the peculiar temporality whereby anticolonial fervour in the cultural and intellectual sphere has paradoxically reached its peak more than thirty years since Central Asian states gained independence. Works in this category resuscitate the anticolonial cultural movement aborted in the Soviet period, expose the taboo legacies of the Soviet past, including environmental exploitation, and affirm the hitherto repressed traditions and practices from local literature, music, orality, and belief systems. Yet, while attentive to ethnicity, such movements are far from nationalist, unlike notable anticolonial counterparts in comparative geographical contexts. Building on ecocriticism and ecomusicology, I further propose the concept of “post-Soviet ecopoetics” – the ecomusical language of environmental solidarity – as a particularly potent decolonial manifestation of Central Asia’s supraethnic retroactive anticolonialism. As a primary case-study, I analyse the ecopoetics of Hamid Ismailov’s nuclear tale *The Dead Lake* (2015), showing how inextricably the novella intertwines identity, nature and music. While uniquely shaped by Kazakh flora and fauna, as well as the local traditions of akyr zaman, zar zaman and aitys, this ecomusical language transcends the boundaries of nationality and citizenship and evokes solidarity with the various human and non-human beings, and landscapes of Central Asia. As such, the novella exemplifies how retroactive anticolonialism in Central Asian cultures moves beyond the binaries of colonising centre vs. colonised periphery, dominant language vs. local languages, human vs. non-human, and proposes a truly inclusive, locally developed decolonial vision in the post-Soviet space.

Keywords: Post-Soviet ecopoetics, retroactive anticolonialism, decolonial, Central Asia, postcolonial ecofiction, nuclear fiction, Hamid Ismailov.

Introduction

Of all the former states in the Soviet Union, countries in Central Asia most closely fit the standard scheme of colonialism, prompting us to pay far more sustained attention than currently observable to the place of Central Asian literatures within global postcolonial cultures (as in Caffee 2013; Koplatazde 2019 a; 2025; Melnikov 2017, among others) and, more broadly, to the idiosyncrasies of the decolonial movements in Central Asia as informed by local epistemologies, belief systems, and literary and musical traditions, especially ones that have been repressed in the Soviet era. In this article, I first propose the concept of “retroactive anticolonialism” as a marker of the recent turn in Central Asian literature towards postcolonial revisionism, or what I call “retroactive anticolonialism”. I argue that works in this category are concerned with exposing the taboo legacies of the Soviet past, including environmental exploitation, while also actively advocating for change in the neocolonial present. There are two key peculiarities that define retroactive anticolonialism. The first, as implied in the term “retroactive”, is temporal, and has to do with the unique chronology of anticolonial activism in Central Asia, whereby anticolonial fervour paradoxically reached its peak over thirty years following postcolonial independence. The other has to do with the supranational form that this anticolonialism takes, contrary to the generally nationalist political and cultural movements in comparative postcolonial geographical contexts. When elaborating on the above-mentioned differences in the first part of the article, I will examine the political and cultural context of “retroactive anticolonialism”, referencing Central Asian writers and artists from the Soviet period to the present day, among them Sadriddin Ayni, Chingiz Aitmatov, Olzhas Suleimenov, Shahzoda Samarqani, Almagul Menlibayeva, Saule Suleimenova, Ak Welsapar, and others. Emphasis will be placed on works at the intersection of culture and environmental activism, as it is precisely here, I argue, that key decolonial movements have been crystalising. At the end of this section, I will introduce Kyrgyz-born Uzbek author Hamid Ismailov’s novella *The Dead Lake* (2015) through the lens of retroactive anti-colonialism.

In the second part of the article, I propose the theoretical concept of “post-Soviet eco-poetics” and examine Ismailov’s novella through close readings. I define “post-Soviet eco-poetics” as an ecomusical language that is uniquely shaped by indigenous flora and fauna, as well as the hitherto repressed local spiritual, literary, and musical traditions, such as, as in Ismailov’s novella, *akyr zaman*, *zar zaman* and *aitys*. This type of eco-poetics interweaves markers of identity, nature and music, through a new inter-ethnic language of solidarity that transcends the boundaries of nationality or citizenship, challenges both the Soviet and Western, technologically orientated notion of progress, and evokes solidarity with the various human and non-human beings, and landscapes of Central Asia. I argue that post-Soviet eco-poetics is one of the central strands of retroactive anticolonialism in Central Asian cultures, one that moves beyond the binaries of colonising centre vs. colonised periphery, dominant language vs. local languages, human vs. non-human, and proposes a truly inclusive, locally developed vision of decolonial political and cultural aesthetics in the post-Soviet space.

I conclude by pointing to other prominent examples of post-Soviet eco-poetics in Central Asian “ecofictions” – the term that I use to account for the permeability of formal categories of “prose”, “poetry”, or “music” at the intersection of creativity and environmental activism –

including the works of Kyrgyz pagan metal band Darkestrah, Kazakhstani musician Galya Bisengalieva and Kazakhstani artist Kamila Narysheva.

Theorising Retroactive Anticolonialism

One of the key concerns of postcolonial studies has been to trace the parallel development of anticolonial and nationalist movements in colonial and neocolonial settings. More recently, however, scholars have challenged the association, if not interchangeable use of, the concepts of anticolonialism and nationalism (Cahen 2012), and have emphasised that theories of nationalism need to be attentive to the historical specificity of their claims (Go & Watson, 2019). While Central Asian states were, in many ways, typical colonies as understood in postcolonial scholarship, their nation self-definition has adopted highly idiosyncratic forms, including in the realm of intellectual and literary culture (see, among others, Mamedova and Shatalova 2016; Melnikov 2017; Tlostanova 2018; Koplatazde 2019 a, 2025; Bisenova 2023; Sharipova et al. 2024; Kudaibergenova 2017, 2025). To begin with, unlike other typically nationalist anticolonial political and cultural movements, Central Asian countries' post-independence self-definition, as led by local thinkers and cultural activists, has predominantly adopted a supranational form, all while placing emphasis on bringing to the fore repressed local practices and epistemologies.

To bring out this specificity, I will briefly refer to some representative historical examples of anticolonialism with strong nationalist leanings. During Algeria's struggle for independence from France in the 1960s, the nationalist Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama led by Abdelhamid Ben Badis, in a bid to harbour patriotism, foregrounded the Arab-Muslim basis of the Algerian identity by adopting the nationalist motto "Islam is our religion, Algeria is our homeland, Arabic is our language". After independence, however, the Algerian government appropriated the slogan, disregarding the melting-pot nature of the Algerian community – its ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Ironically, when Ben Badis first voiced the nationalist motto, he did so in French, the language of the elite intellectuals who called for decolonization, the very people its tripartite definition of Algerianness excluded. Yet, some local thinkers, like Malek Haddad, seemingly justified the move, arguing that there was "only an approximate correspondence between Arab thinking and French vocabulary" (Haddad, 1961, 34). So tragic was Haddad's internal conflict that he altogether gave up writing after 1961. Many postcolonial authors and thinkers, including Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (who abandoned English in favour of Gikuyu) shared Haddad's dilemma, and predicted (in hindsight, erroneously) that the languages of the "coloniser" would be displaced by "national" vernaculars. At precisely the same time, authors in Trinidad and Tobago, which had gained independence from British rule on August 31, 1962, were dealing with a similar set of questions on what constituted national literature. As Trinidad-born British author Anthony Vahni Capideo (2025) recalls, the post-independence period in her native Trinidad was marked by tight state control of literature as part of the construction of the national canon, which led to a frustrating choice of reading available at local bookshops. To this day, considerations of the role of nationalism are central in many formerly colonised countries. In the case of India, for instance, Makarand R. Paranjape (2012, 55) asks:

Very simply, the question before thinking Indians is whether [...] to denounce nationalism itself as a false ideology—and to look for some other way, some other principle of organizing our civic life? Or, whether to go back to these very traditions, to rejuvenate them to deal with some of our present problems?

On the one hand, since gaining independence from the Soviet state in 1991, most Central Asian countries have displayed certain tendencies of hegemonic nationalism, ethnocentrism and religious radicalism typical of postcolonial nation-building, as in the cases above. As an inevitable legacy of the Soviet colonial demarcation of pre-Soviet Turkistan into the five separate entities that are now post-Soviet Central Asian republics,¹ the post-Soviet epoch has seen numerous interethnic or religious conflicts, among them the Tajik Civil War (1992-1997), the Batken Conflict in Kyrgyzstan (1999), and the Andijan Massacre in Uzbekistan (2005). Moreover, when defining post-Soviet nationhoods, especially in the early post-Soviet period, Central Asian leaders eagerly attempted to resurrect their collective pre-Soviet historical, linguistic, and cultural identity to develop a sense of anchorage, self-esteem and pride in their ancestors (Schnirelmann 2011). This search often took the form ethnic primordialism and autochthonism involving the glorification of the concerned nation's ancient "golden age", with its key heroes and achievements, and the inflection of geographical and temporal boundaries to suggest the antiquity of the concerned countries, and their physical greatness relative to their contemporary forms (Abashin 2007). More lately, however, Central Asian countries have followed relatively stable ethnic pluralism and a generally secular religious path, even the more openly religious states such as Uzbekistan (Khalid 2003).

When the wave of dissent swept over the Soviet republics on the verge of its dissolution, certain political observers at the time noted that Central Asian republics were developing "assertive popular movements" that were "essentially anticolonial, reformist and nationalist" (Hunter 1990, 325). In hindsight, however, Central Asia did not quite produce leading spokespeople for the nation in the late 1980s as in other Soviet states (Levon Ter Petrosyan in Armenia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia and so on) who openly challenged "the supranational relationship of superordination and subordination dictated by the imperial system" (Suny 1993, 131). As Gregory Gleason (1997, 35) puts rather bluntly, though not entirely unfairly, "Central Asian countries did not fight for their independence" and passively perpetuated the Soviet political culture, unlike Central and Eastern European states that actively fought through regime change movements. For example, while Kazakh historians tend to view the 1986 Zheltoqsan protest by Kazakh youth as a manifestation of growing national consciousness of ethnic Kazakhs that eventually led to independence, others, especially in the West, have interpreted Kazakhstan's independence either as a "gift" or a default occurrence (Shelekpayev 2021). Nari Shelekpayev (2021, 858) offers a balanced view reconciling these two positions, noting that "the bloodshed of Zheltoqsan arose from efforts to win the 'gift' of independence".

¹ While Douglas Northrop (2003, 33-4) considers the creation of distinct Central Asian national identities as colonial in nature, Sergei Abashin (2007) has suggested that the Central Asian republics were not simply top-down creations of the Soviet State's "divide and conquer" policy and that groups such as Jadids and pan/anti-pan-Turkists played an important part in the process.

In sum, the anticolonial struggle in Central Asian states never reached the level of intensity and continuity found in comparable geographical contexts. One key reason is the above-mentioned colonial policy which essentially shaped Central Asian nation states, making it difficult for individual countries to fall back on pre-existing national traditions in their anticolonial struggle. An equally important factor has been the unprecedentedly harsh repression, or virtual extermination, of all intellectual movements that would challenge the Soviet Union's openly declared anti-imperialist stance and expose its imperialist practices at home. Until recently, we could not speak of a unified tradition of postcolonial writing in Central Asia. This tradition, in its nascent form, was interrupted by the rise of Bolshevism, cutting the line of continuity between pre-Soviet and post-Soviet anticolonial literary discourses. As Madina Tlostanova (2022, 1000) observes, anticolonial writing from Central Asia was "either sanitized or censored into acceptable Soviet socialist realist forms", while their authors (including Abdulla Qodiriy, Abdurauf Fitrat, Cho'lpon and many others) "were quickly disillusioned with Soviet reality and were murdered at NKVD firing ranges with no chance for future generations to rely on their anticolonial legacy".

The suppression of anticolonial literary currents throughout the Soviet period meant that even works produced under the relaxed censorship of late Soviet period, such as Olzhas Suleimenov's *Az I Ya* (1975), resist classification as "nationalist", let alone "anticolonial", in the vein of seminal decolonial texts such as Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) or Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Harsha Ram (2001, 289; 293) points out that while *Az I Ya* (1975) represents "the definitive intervention by a non-Russian Soviet intellectual to address the question of interethnic relations and their consequences for Russian and Central Asian history", "Suleimenov's position has never been one of militant revolt: even as he has pleaded for the ethnic dignity of his people, his ultimate vision has been one of 'synthesis' and 'interdependence' between Slav and Turk".

When it comes to the processes of national self-definition in the post-era, we can broadly observe two parallel postcolonial movements in Central Asia: one attempting to unearth the specific traditions of locales, especially in the political realm, and the other emphasising shared traditions and solidarity. Nonetheless, these two movements, as enfolding in the cultural and intellectual sphere, should not necessarily be seen as divergent or conflictual, not least because many cultural traditions are shared across the borders. As Tajik author Shahzoda Nazarova Samarqandi (2017) puts it:

Carved up by the Soviets, Central Asia is a place of multiethnic communities and arbitrary borders. With the exception of our mother tongues, Central Asians share virtually everything the region offers – agricultural and pastoral lifestyles, rituals, and traditions. Sometimes it is hard to tell who Tajik is and who is Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazak, or Turkmen.

As Diana Kudaibergenova has demonstrated through extensive work on the subject, since the late 1980s, artists in Central Asia have been challenging the old rigid approaches to geography, history and mobility, with their art serving as "a space for social critique and a space for search and re-conceptualisation of new fluid identities, geographies and region's place on the world map" (Kudaibergenova 2017; 2025; See also Tlostanova 2018; Koplataдзе 2019 a

and 2025). Indeed, Kazakh artist Saule Suleimenova, for instance, consciously draws inspiration from the region's fluid cultural entanglements. She considers the "fractured sense of self-worth" among Kazakhs as "the most devastating colonial legacy", which is why "constructing what one might call a national idea or national image of Kazakhstan, of Kazakhs" has been central to her decolonial artistic mission, as seen in such works as the "Kazakh chronicle" (Suleimenova 2025). For Suleimenova, this process of cultural self-definition first involves working through colonial trauma of such tragedies as the Kazakh famine ("Asharshylyk"), which, by the mere fact of "claiming nearly half of the population" has led to the devastating break in cultural memory. Secondly, Suleimenova (2025) argues that defining "Kazakhness" in the post-Soviet era is impossible without working through the shared cultural code of the Central Asian (and partly Caucasian) region:

It inspires me deeply, when I travel, for example, to Baku, Bishkek, or Bukhara. Not so long ago we didn't have these rigid borders. Our cultures flowed into one another, and to varying degrees we were all connected. Our culture cannot be torn out of this context or presented as something isolated and separate; it exists within this entanglement. So, when we speak about a cultural code, I believe we should speak about the cultural of our entire region.

Some artists have been actively translating these connections into collaborations, with one example being Kazakhstani artist Almagul Menlibayeva and Azeri British filmmaker Suad Gara's multi-media project on the Caspian Sea showcased in Hong Kong in 2025. Similarly, Kazakhstani artists and thinkers of *Creolex Centr* [sic] (2016, passim), Almaty, stress the need of rescuing Central Asia's polyvocality, and articulating differences, whether in terms of gender, class, politics, or culture, that they claim are still ignored in post-Soviet Central Asia, precisely through considering Central Asia as "Transoxiana", a region similar in its creole nature to the Caribbean. This approach would certainly be more inclusive of some of the most marginalised ethnic minorities in Central Asia, such as Koreans, Tatars or North Caucasians, among others.

A key process for defining polyvocal Central Asian nationhoods, one emphasising both cultural affinity and specificity, has been postcolonial revisionism. The postcolonial condition and postcolonial literature always necessarily involve a degree of "reckoning with the colonial past" (Lopez 2001, 7). Especially in their early stages, they are characterized by retrospection, a tendency of looking back to the past to open new possibilities of defining the parameters of the future. Consequently, one of the key characteristics of dominated literatures is a tendency towards subversion, which often involves the questioning of the very metaphysics, centre-periphery dynamics, coloniser-colonised binaries, discourses and linguistic practices emanating from the imperial centre. Through these processes, postcolonial societies create new self-narratives, both individual and collective. This revisionist urge to bring to public attention historical events of the colonial past that have been repressed, and often still remain taboo to this day, is felt especially strongly in the literature from Central Asia, with authors adding more strictly factual, historical (both real and speculative), statistical, or journalistic edge to otherwise fictional works, as well as their life stories. For example, Kazakhstani author Anatoly Chernousov's "Неполное собрание сочинений Ернэзіка Натальевича Печейкина" (2018)

imagines the path Central Asian countries would have taken had they not been affected by the fragmentation of Turkistan and Soviet nationalities policy (Koplatadze 2019 a; 2025). The urge to unearth painful moments of colonial history is also strongly felt in Uzbek author Bibish’s autofictional novel *The Dancer from Khiva* (2004) and Tajik author Shahzoda Samarqandi’s novel *Mothersland* (2024), both of which expose the destructive effects of the communist system on the locals, in particular women, as part of the forced cotton monoculture across Soviet Central Asia (ibid).

Retroactive Anticolonialism and Ecocritical Culture

A particularly strong current of the revisionist phenomenon in post-Soviet Central Asia, and one that this article is primarily concerned with, pertains to environmental critique. While there exist debates as to whether the Communist ideology supported ecological fairness, critics generally agree that Soviet policies affecting the environment of the imperial “periphery” – whether the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing, the disappearance of the Aral Sea due to cotton monoculture, or the forced sedentarisation of the nomadic peoples – were overall disastrous (Myl’nikov 2016; Vinogradov and Zimin 2008; Yanshin and Melua 1991; Feshbach and Friendly 1992; Chattopadhyay 2014; Ziegler 1987) and colonial in nature (Peterson 2019). Furthermore, the colonial narrative which involves altering the land of the colonised, often through violent means, and which has often couched in the racially inflected discourse of the civilising mission justifying colonial projects, was notably prevalent in the Soviet case. A representative source is Polish Soviet director Dziga Vertov’s propaganda film *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934) celebrating Soviet reforms in Central Asia. The opening sequence features seven shots of fully veiled women, intercut with the subtitle “My face was in a dark prison. I led a blind life in ignorance and darkness. I was a slave without chains”. In the next part of the film, which portrays Lenin’s achievements, a veiled woman is seen praising Lenin: “Where he saw darkness he made light, turned a garden to a desert, death he turned to life”. As such, the discourse of bringing “light” and freedom to the “enslaved” women in the Eastern “darkness” (echoing the European colonial denotation of Africa as the “Dark Continent”) is inextricably linked in Soviet propaganda with the transformation of the supposedly infertile Central Asian steppe.

From the Soviet period to this day, authors in Central Asia have been inadvertently influenced by metropolitan colonial narratives, which their works alternatively echoed, revised, or challenged – with various levels of explicitness, as determined by corresponding levels of censorship. For instance, in Tajik author Sadriddin Ayni’s novel *Dokhunda* (Poor Man) (1930), the protagonist Yodgor directly echoes Vertov’s civilising vision when he sings a revolutionary song to his fellow Central Asians, proclaiming: “We, poor souls, turned this desert and steppe into a flower garden” (Ayni 1930, 459).² By contrast, several of Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov’s works with an explicitly ecocritical dimension, especially *The Day Lasts More*

² ‘Мо камбағалонем, ки ин водию ин дашт кардем чу гулгашт’. Translation modified after Akhmedjanova (2024, 115).

Than a Hundred Years (1980), challenge this binary, problematising the equation of the steppe with backwardness, and of man-made transformation with progress (Banerjee 2018).

Crucially, the centrality of environmental exploitation in the Soviet colonial project in Central Asia has contributed to close ties between literature and ecological movements. In 1957, one of Kazakhstan's most prominent writers, and a native of the Semipalatinsk region, Mukhtar Auezov spoke about the disastrous effects of the nuclear tests in his country, including high adolescent suicides, at the international antinuclear conference in Tokyo, at a time of complete secrecy surrounding the Soviet nuclear testing program (Kassenova 2022, 62). Following in his footsteps, in the late Soviet period, Kazakh writer and activist Olzhas Suleimenov assumed leadership of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement in the late Soviet period. Turkmen writer and journalist Ak Welsapar published several investigative articles about the "colossal ecological problems in Central Asia, mostly caused by the overuse of pesticides needed for cotton production" and resulting in drying up of the Aral Sea, including a collection of essays, *The White Dragon's Path, a publicist book about environmental degradation in Central Asia* (Welsapar 1994). Though the works appeared in the context of the relatively relaxed censorship during perestroika, Welsapar nonetheless drew detractors from the State, doubtless contributing to the censorship of the author's works and his exile to Sweden. Since then, Welsapar has explored ecocritical questions in his fiction, such as his novel *The Tale of Aypi* (2016), which focuses on the Soviet plan to displace the inhabitants of the fishing village on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Locally, post-Soviet creative artists play a central role in ecological movements and continue to see their creative works as inseparable from environmental activism (Dağyeli and Kulinov 2025; Koplatazde 2019 a; 2025; Ageleuov and Sultanbayeva 2019, Rachmadiev 2021). One prominent example is Artcom, a community-based contemporary art and public engagement platform founded by Aigerim Kapar in 2015 in Kazakhstan. While censorship still hinders explicit explorations of the environmental effects of Soviet and post-Soviet policies, the question features prominently in Central Asian literature, art and film.

Central Asian creative artists' responses to environmental questions since the Soviet times to this day have been marked by a gradual shift towards increasingly postcolonial considerations of national identity and autonomy. In the late Soviet period, ecological mobilization frequently assumed ethnonationalist forms across the post-Soviet world, with ecological movements serving to "crystallize, stimulate, or spark nationalist movements" that played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union (Schatz 1999, 138). However, in Central Asia, while environmental activism was increasingly bringing to the fore the hitherto repressed questions of identity, and Russian imperial attitudes, the movement has never foregrounded nationalism or ethnic primordialism. Rather, it has been built around ethnic diversity, and solidarity, both among Central Asians, and other peoples whose environments had been subjected to imperial exploitation. In the case of the Semipalatinsk movement, for instance, ecological protests adopted internationalist, rather than ethno-nationalist overtones (Schatz 1999). As Edward Schatz (1999) points out, the priority at that time was garnering much-needed resources, expertise and support internationally for the anti-nuclear Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, as focalised within the very name of the movement stressing solidarity with US activists.

In the post-Soviet period, ecological activism has become inextricably linked with the processes of ethnic and national self-definition, as most notably expressed in the cultural sphere which abounds in ethnic tropes (Rachmadiev 2021; Rezakhanlou 2024). In most Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan, literature is often the only free sphere of contestation under neocolonial authoritarian regimes, and therefore the prime platform for subversive critique, and indeed activism. Many authors, including Syinat Sultanalieva (Kyrgyzstan) and Zhanar Sekerbayeva (Kazakhstan), openly declare their positioning at the intersection of their creative output and activist work, while others, such as Lilya Kalas (Kazakhstan) and Eleonora Kasymova (Tajikistan) frequently critique their countries’ neocolonial dynamics in their works (Koplatadze, 2019 a; 2025). Their texts prompt the consideration of post-Soviet fictions as texts of socio-political critique and, by extension, of aesthetics as a political category, echoing the tradition of anticolonial literature. Again, what is striking within this retroactive, anticolonial movement is that it is rarely (if ever) nationalist. Ismailov’s novella provides an important case study in this regard. As I shall demonstrate, Ismailov puts a spotlight on elements of ethnic identities that have been repressed, but he does so through crafting a specific language of ecopoetics, what I define as an ecomusical language of inter-ethnic, decolonial solidarity.

Hamid Ismailov, *The Dead Lake* (2015)

As discussed earlier, postcolonial ecofiction often carries a prominent dimension that may be described as “activist”. To quote Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015, ix), it “may not necessarily lead to direct action but raise consciousness of its possibilities and draw attention to the urgency of the causes they seek, however obliquely or even ambivalently, to present”. As a result, postcolonial ecocriticism tends to be considered as a politically inflected branch of environmental humanities, one that studies literary texts as modes of quasi-political engagement and mediation. In Ismailov’s novella *The Dead Lake* (2015), the inclination to highlight the urgency of the environmental cause in Central Asia is both implicit and explicit and revives the ethos of the late Soviet ecological movement, especially in Kazakhstan, described earlier. The author points out that he conceived his text as a “museum of Soviet Union”, to reconstruct a sobering picture of its “aspiration to become the number one country in the world, in technology, and everything, without looking at the price that people would pay for this” (Ismailov 2023). As such, the work is typical of the revisionist urge to bring to public attention historical events of the colonial past that have been repressed and often remain taboo to this day. While Ismailov is not Kazakh himself – he was born in Kyrgyzstan and grew up in Uzbekistan – he feels an affinity with all Central Asia and its common Soviet past. Aware that the subject of the nuclear tests is still a painful one for Kazakhs, he humorously suggests that it is their nomadic mentality that does not allow them to dwell on painful events gone by and notes his desire to uncover untold stories on their behalf: “maybe Kazakh people don’t want to remember, but I do. That’s why this sad story had to be retold in all its sadness” (Ismailov 2018).

Ismailov’s works, written across three languages, Uzbek, Russian and English, and translated into many more, hold broad transnational resonance. Arguably, it is precisely this rich cultural and contextual complexity that allows him the critical distance necessary to

advance a unique post-Soviet ecopoetics, and to ultimately undermine or complicate our existing ideas about ethnicity and nationality. Furthermore, while the sense of solidarity and affinity cannot grant an author any special authority to write about a non-native culture, Ismailov is explicitly drawing on Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectual and cultural traditions that are shared across the borders. Again, this approach complicates straightforward subcategorizations of Central Asian culture. This is not to say that Ismailov problematically treats Central Asian culture as a monolith, but rather that his work teases out the latter's polyvocality, and the translatability of some of its key cultural manifestations, such as *akyr zaman*, *aitys* and *zar zaman*, across Central Asian countries. This approach very much aligns with that adopted by many other Central Asian thinkers, writers, and creative artists, as explored earlier, whether through the decolonial art inspired by the "shared cultural code" of Central Asia and the Caspian region (Suleimenova and Menlibayeva), the speculative historical fiction imagining a reunited Turkistan (Chernousov), or the theoretical conceptualisation of Central Asia as Transoxiana (Creolex Centr).

The Dead Lake is informed by a real historical event – the Soviet atomic testing in Kazakhstan carried out between 1945 and 1989 (comprising a total of 468 nuclear explosions, 125 atmospheric and 343 underground) – and its effects on the local population and environment. The title of the novella refers to a name local Kazakhs gave to the artificial lake created by Soviet scientists on the Semipalatinsk nuclear site, in the bed of the Chagan River, which ended up contaminating ten surrounding villages and towns with radiation (Kassenova 2022, 48-9). The revisionist function of the novella is made explicit from the epigraph and the paratexts that it evokes. A statement by Kazakhstan's parliament (24, June 2005), it highlights that the aggregate yield of the nuclear devices tested in Semipalatinsk "exceeded by factor of 25000 the power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima by the Americans in 1945" (Ismailov 2105, 6). Paratexts, such as epigraphs, surround and extend a literary work's text to indicate, among others, "the genre, or the tenor of a piece of writing" (Genette 1996, 160). In this case, Ismailov's factual epigraph draws a parallel between the Soviet nuclear project and other cases of nuclear imperialism targeting overseas lands, indigenous peoples or vulnerable populations.³ Furthermore, the epigraph performs an instructive-revisionist function for Central Asia's younger generations that might be unfamiliar with the realities of nuclear testing. The tests were kept secret at the time, including from the local population, and only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union has scholarship, slowly emerging from censorship, uncovered the exact sequence of events and the true extent of destruction in the local area (Kassenova 2022; Shevchenko 1995; Stawkowski 2025).

The actual text of the novella is not otherwise openly concerned with historical and political particulars. The novella follows Erzhan, a 27-year-old man whose physical development freezes when, as a child, he swims in the "dead lake" contaminated by nuclear radiation. This acquired disability crushes his hopes of pursuing his notable talents as a musician, as well as romance with his childhood sweetheart, a beautiful girl-next-door Aisulu. The story is narrated by an unnamed male traveller who meets the now 27-year-old Erzhan on

³ These include U.S nuclear testing in the Pacific Island region of Oceania (1946-1962) and the lands of the Native Americans in the Southwest (1940s-1990s), British nuclear testing in the traditional lands of the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people in Australia (1952-1963), French nuclear testing in the Algerian Sahara (1960-1966), or Chinese nuclear testing in Lop Nur, Xinjiang (1964-1966).

a train, and goes on to relate his life up until that moment.⁴ The lop-sided chronology of the novella captures the aesthetic language of "retroactive colonialism" which merges the critiques of the neocolonial present and the colonial realities of the past, suggesting that we cannot talk of one without properly digesting the other. While the spotlight falls on Erzhan, characters in his immediate circle are also fleshed out significantly. These include, on the one hand, Erzhan's immediate family: his grandparents – granddad Daulet and grandma Ulbarsyn, his mother Kanymat and his uncle Keper, and, on the other hand, the family that lives next to him: grandmother Sholpan, her son Shaken, Shaken's wife Baichek, and their daughter, the above-mentioned Aisulu, who returns Erzhan's affection, but tragically dies at the end of the novella.

The plot is not defined by grand actions and is broadly marked by three key events. The first is the story of Erzhan's mysterious conception. Once, as if beckoned by some mysterious force, Erzhan's mother goes out into the desert, gets caught in some unknown blast, with the accompanying storm, and is later discovered lying bloody in a pit by some strange man in a spacesuit. Following this event, she stops speaking and finds she is pregnant with Erzhan. The event carries allegorical subtext of violating the sacred feminine, and, by extension, Mother Earth, which, rather than going barren, becomes mute (an important motif in the novella) and can only produce a lost, fatherless generation that Erzhan stands for. Notably, the absence of father figures is an important theme in the novel. Erzhan's grandmother draws a parallel between Erzhan's coming to the world and the story of the local deity Gesar, and tells Erzhan that he grew from a seed. Later in the novel, Erzhan suspects that he might in fact be the illegitimate son of the head of the neighbouring family, Shaken. The puzzle is never solved, deliberately shrouding Erzhan's identity in mystery, with the different narratives on his conception – nuclear, mystical, and illegitimate – suggesting the corruption of his identity and, more allegorically, of Semipalatinsk's lost generation. In the second key event, young Erzhan swims in a radioactive lake, leading to the freezing of his physical growth. The third key event occurs when, disillusioned by his life as a young man stuck in a child's body, and unable to pursue his love for Aisulu, Erzhan goes back to swim in the lake, hoping for some miraculous recovery.

The nuclear arms race is only touched upon explicitly in the novella through the character of Shaken, who ardently parrots and champions Soviet propaganda on the importance of nuclear bombs in building Communism and overtaking the USA (Ismailov 2015, 42). Shaken fails to find allies, however. Erzhan's pacifist grandfather Daulet, the veteran of both World Wars, emphasises how the atomic bomb is merely destroying the local habitat of the steppe, such as gerbils and foxes, and hints at the older generation's keener awareness of non-human environments and their inseparability from humans (42). For the rest, the novella remains focused on the story of Erzhan, his environment, and local myths and legends, woven together through subtle parallels as part of the work's ecocritical critique. The novella is quintessentially "ecocritical" because the natural world is not seen only in relation to human concerns, and the latter are not presented as more significant than the environmental ones (Re 2024). Rather, Ismailov tells a story of people living in, but not separately from, their environment. His novella redefines unequal power relationships between humans and the environment whereby the first are active and impact on the second (which is passive) and

⁴ Their encounter is based on a similar meeting in Ismailov's life, which made a lasting impression on him.

instead promotes a vision of humans and non-humans as creatures sharing an environment, while also acknowledging the otherness of animals and their world. To convey this harmony, as well as its distortion by the nuclear blasts, Ismailov crafts a specific, ecopoetic language which recurrently links metaphors around music, nature and identity, and can be best understood with the methodological tools of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecomusicology.

Theorising Post-Soviet Ecopoetics

In this article, my usage of the term “ecopoetics” moves beyond the traditional meaning of the term that simply denotes poetry or other artistic works which evoke ecocritical themes. “Post-Soviet ecopoetics” describes what I identify as a particular phenomenon whereby fiction, in this case literature, explores the themes of identity, nature and music, through a language uniquely shaped by indigenous flora and fauna, as well as local musical and literary traditions hitherto repressed by the colonial centre. At the same time, this new ecomusical language is inter-ethnic: it transcends the boundaries of nationality or citizenship and evokes solidarity with the various human and non-human beings, and landscapes of Central Asia. As previously mentioned, it exemplifies how retroactive anticolonialism in Central Asian cultures moves beyond heteronormative binaries in favour of inclusive decolonial aesthetics based on traditional local epistemologies. The nuances of the concept inherent in my usage of the term, denoting a specific ecocritical language, are best understood by building on the methodological tools of ecomusicology.

Ecomusicology is a field of study often traced back to Canadian musical composer and environmentalist Raymon Murray Schafer, who used the term to explain the sonic nature of physical environments or soundscapes. It examines how music is used to create or express concerns about the environment (Schafer 1994). I extend Murray Schafer’s definition to argue that fictional works, or “ecofictions”, might not only function in their respective creative genres, but also go beyond it, to serve specific decolonial functions. To this effect, my usage of the term “ecofictions” accounts for the permeability of the formal categories of “prose”, “poetry”, or “music” at the intersection of creativity and environmental activism. For instance, postcolonial literary texts might not simply be read as literary pieces, through traditional tools of literary criticism, but also, to some extent, as sound pieces. In Ismailov’s text, music does not merely feature as a key theme of the novella; rather, the very architectonics of the text is musical itself, for the specific function of underlining the text’s key message on interspecies and interethnic harmony, and the essentially decolonial aesthetics of solidarity. Furthermore, Ismailov’s “post-Soviet ecopoetics” builds on and reconstructs the repressed elements of Kazakh culture, especially the oral storytelling rooted in musicality, for instance the tradition of aitys, as well as pre-Soviet, anticolonial literary aesthetics of *zar zaman*. This is a crucial point, since, while drawing from the Soviet Central ecocritical tradition, Ismailov is also unearthing the aborted anticolonial potential of even earlier, pre-Soviet Kazakh culture, now in the context of explicit postcolonial environmental critique in the new, post-Soviet setting. Furthermore, unlike the “reconstruction” of local myths and traditions in the service of nation-building in the realm of politics, the process of “reconstruction” here is no simple matter of

recovering what was lost or putting back together something that was torn asunder.⁵ Rather, it involves imaginative work on the author's part towards creating a new, decolonial language that is reflective of the complex postcolonial identities of Central Asian states.

Throughout Ismailov's novella, music is interconnected with the steppe and Erzhan's coming of age both stylistically and thematically. In terms of form, the three parts of the novella are named after musical notes: "До" (C), "До-ля" (C-A), and "Соль ми-фа" (G E-F) that also denote the words "before", "lot" (or "destiny"), and "the salt of the myth" respectively. The narrative and action of the plot are propelled forward musically, with the rhythm to Erzhan's story set by the sound of the train's wheels, which "придавал его рассказу такт за тактом, такт за тактом" (16) (an ironic and foreboding reference, considering the association of trains with modernity and technological progress, and their teleological function in Soviet culture). Visually too, the journey resembles sheets of some "mysterious music":

провода на столбах с их пустельгами и сайками, жаворонками да сизоворонками и еще бог весть с какой летучей живностью плыли вослед от столба к столбу, от столба к столбу, как ноты неведомой музыки от такта к такты, от такта к такты (29).

In both examples above, the rhythmic repetition of phrases within sentences, as well as alliteration (the dominance of "т" sounds) and sibilance ("сайками", "сизоворонками", "столба", "столбу") envelop the text in a strong musical quality. In fact, Ismailov admits that he intended for the novella to be "as musical as a Kazakh song" (Ismailov 2023, 59:40 – 61:01). As such, his text is rich in ecopoetic auditory imagery whereby scarlet tulips bloom "like a glow of swaying notes" ("как зарево качающихся нот", 60), or the appearance of Aisulu's face in the wild grass terrifies Erzhan like "скрежет камня по стеклу" (101). Ismailov is well-versed in the musical traditions of Central Asia and has noted that being married to one of the leading musicologists of Central Asia has exposed him to performances by every notable musician in Central Asia at his own home (Ismailov 2023, 59:40-61:01). Some of his other works, such as his "multimedia poem" "Hourglass" (Ismailov 2011), provide further examples of the author's experimentation with merging sound and fiction.

Structurally, music is first associated in the novel with childhood innocence, then subsequently with Erzhan's identity crisis after his exposure to radiation, (switching from violin to dombra), and ultimately with the loss of identity, expressed through silence and the abandonment of music. Thematically, the prominence of music is introduced from the very beginning, as Erzhan's connection to his ancestors is established through music, and expressed in a metaphor that links his identity to the nature of the steppe, as "мальчишка впитывал всю вековую мудрость казаха, сохраняемую в песнях, как степная земля впитывает весенние дожди, превращая их в зеленый жузгун и терескен, да в алые маки и тюльпаны" (19). Local musical traditions are shown to hold a vital force for the youth, as vital as water is to the plants of the steppe. Indeed, Erzhan learns early on to contextualise his identity and lived reality through myths and local musical traditions. As mentioned earlier, Erzhan's conception, as interpreted by his grandmother, is linked with the Tengrist legend of Gesar, a deity sent from

⁵ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their advice on articulating this point.

the sky to kill the demon Lusaban, and a common hero of aitys (musical performances of oral tales in Central Asia) performed by Kyrgyz and Kazakh aqyns (performers of aitys). In the Tibetan versions of the legend, Gesar first appears as a weak, deformed and disabled herd boy named Joru, but later displays unparalleled valour and “transforms into a super-hero” (Bender, 275). In another echo with Ismailov’s tale, in Gesar’s stories, we can trace “a kind of ‘eco-genealogy’ in which the origins of land, plants, animals, and humans are linked together” (Bender, 278). The Gesar legend, prominent in Tibet and Mongolia, has traditionally been transmitted by wandering bards, and in this regard, circuitously links it to the tradition of aitys. In aitys, too, ancestral spirits, their actions, and achievements are central to the stories that together make up the collective memory of the local communities, transmitted from generation to generation by aqyns (Kalkamanova and Otkulbek kyzy 2025). Traditionally, aitys(h) starts with aqyns demonstrating their historical lineages, emphasising the centrality of self-identification and a knowledge of genealogy in the aqyns’ craft (Kalkamanova and Otkulbek kyzy 2025). It is highly significant, therefore, that later in the novel, inspired by the legend of Gesar, Erzhan goes back to swim in the lake, hoping to defeat the evil and become whole again, only to further plunge himself into the throes of depression. The subtext here is that the post-nuclear world of Erzhan has become so absurd, so removed from the “natural” order of things, that the protagonist’s exposure to local myths only leads to misinterpretations and further absurdities, adding to Erzhan’s existing confusion over his mysterious conception. Ismailov’s foregrounding of Tengrist legend, as opposed to the more popular Central Asian equivalent (such as Manas) only reinforces the ambiguity around Erzhan’s identity, as experienced both by the protagonist and the disorientated reader.

Through references to local musical traditions and belief systems, Ismailov’s narrative suggests post-nuclear and metaphysical catastrophes surrounding Erzhan are inextricably linked and trace their roots back to Russia’s colonial mission in Central since Tsarist times, with the imperial destruction of nomadic life eventually culminating in forced Soviet sedentarisation of the nomads, and the subsequent tragedies, from the famine to the nuclear tests. We see this is an episode when once, when accompanying his uncle Shaken, little Erzhan comes across a desolate nomadic site which produces a deep impression on him, reminiscent of akыр zaman (end of the world):

Хоть и мал был Ержан, но он видел в степи развалины казахских кочевий и кладбищ: округлых, как будто бы время и природа, жалея, мало-помалу срезали им углы и выступы . . . Никогда Ержан не видел ничего более страшного и похожего на то, что его бабка Улбарсын описывала словами «акыр заман» — конец света... (28).

The parallel between the two forms of destruction – the ruin of nomadism and akыр zaman – intricately crafts Ismailov’s postcolonial critique as an echo of Central Asia’s pre-Soviet anticolonial currents. Akыр zaman, the metaphysical vision of the end of the world, is central to the literary and oral traditions in Central Asia, in particular Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, the concept is prominently associated with 19th century Kazakh literary tradition of zar zaman (time of sorrow), an essentially anticolonial literary movement that emerged as an ideological reaction – mostly from the perspective of Islamic Sharia and

traditional nomadic customs – to the Tsarist colonial conquest and resulting socio-economic and spiritual decline of the Kazakh nomadic culture. Its key motifs include lamenting the past, the glory of national traditions, critique of Russian policies (especially in connection with land grabbing), and the rejection of social and economic innovations of the era (Nurtazina 2012; McGuire 2024). The dominant tone of zar zaman works is pessimistic, evoking the fatal inevitability of spiritual decline and the end of the world. To give a representative example, in Murat Monle-Uly's vision of Kazakhstan's spiritual decline, nature withdraws its blessings from Kazakhs, and by the time of akyr zaman, the man is a "scoundrel" (Nurtazina 2012). In Kyrgyzstan, akyr zaman is associated with the contemporaneously and conceptually equivalent 'Zamana' (era) movement, which similarly reflected on the profound socio-political shifts in Kyrgyz society under Russian colonisation. Its key representative is celebrated 19th century Kyrgyz thinker Kalygul-Oluya (Kalygul the Saint, or Sage). Notably, Kalygul Oluya's poem "Akyr Zaman", which describes the moral decay of Kyrgyz society, bears explicit echoes with his poem "Russians will come" (Орус келер), which prophesies the colonial destruction of Kyrgyz traditions, as well as Kyrgyz environment. Due to its powerful anticolonial thrust, akyr zaman literature faced heavy censorship, and its content and ideas had to be transferred orally by aqyns. Ismailov's strategic reference to akyr zaman thus traces a potent connection between his postcolonial critique, facing similar censorship in the post-Soviet era, and the pre-Soviet anticolonial (and proto-ecocritical) movements.

The postcolonial subtext of the reference to akyr zaman in Erzhan's impression is soon reinforced by the ardent Soviet supporter uncle Shaken's remark upon witnessing the desolation of the former nomadic site: "Если мы не только не догоним, но и не обгоним американцев, весь мир будет таким!" (28). On the surface, Shaken is seemingly motivated by the care for the world, but the irony inherent in this logic, and consequently Shaken's internalised colonialism, is glaring: the Soviets are supposedly arming themselves with nuclear weapons to avoid destruction, but do not consider the destruction of Kazakh territories as a problematic price for this goal. Furthermore, Shaken altogether dismisses the causes of the specific desolation at hand, which predate nuclear testing, because facing them would make him confront the hypocrisy inherent in the Soviet "modernising" mission. By contrast, Erzhan's sentiments quoted above are paradoxically closer to those of the personified nature, which has "smoothed the rough edges" of destruction "out of pity", with his sense of trans-species solidarity and empathy serving a contrast to the destructive, supposedly civilising progress for the sake of the greater good. As a final parallel, at the end of the novella, the village where the two families lived, most of its members now dead as a direct or indirect result of the blasts, ends up resembling the ruins of the nomadic site witnessed earlier by Erzhan, being made up of "заброшенных, нежилых домов в глубь степи, где в мареве встающего, как застывший взрыв, степного солнца виднелось с пяток мазаров-гробниц. Вот и все" (108). Ultimately, the novella suggests that the supposed force of progress has not only reduced human dwellings to grotesque ruins, but has also destroyed the natural laws of life, the ties between parents and children, the ties between the environment and its inhabitants, as prophesied in akyr zaman. Indeed, the pessimistic vision of akyr zaman is explicitly echoed in the song that Erzhan keeps singing obsessively while playing on his dombra, after his exposure to radiation, in such lines as "нет ни в ком мусульманства –/есть на языке а в сердце нет./Кочевая судьба, обилие богатств", or "настоящего вояки-мужчины нет" (Ismailov 2015, 69). For Erzhan, this local

song, built around traditional oral storytelling, perfectly captures his own identity struggle: “ему казалось, что каждое слово ее о нем, и не песню поет, а рассказывает свою жизнь” (69).

Erzhan’s identity crisis, in terms of his disconnection from local music and legends, unfolds gradually, reaching a climax when we encounter him at the age of twenty-seven. This episode chronologically comes at the very opening of the novella, when the narrator meets Erzhan on the train. The narrator assumes that Erzhan is a young busker who will perform songs of local exotic flavour on his *dombra*. Erzhan is offended by this assumption and boasts his violin skills for performing European classical music. On one level, Erzhan’s response suggests his reluctance to be seen as someone commodifying his local culture for monetary gain, on another level, however, it symbolises the gulf that now separates him from his local cultural traditions, since, after all, the performers of *aitys*, accompanied by Kazakh *dombra* or Kyrgyz *komuz*, would frequently travel and perform throughout Central Asia, and so there would be nothing inherently shameful about Erzhan following in this tradition. Notably, this tradition of “the wandering bards” (Winner 1958, 27) has traditionally held potent quality of dissent in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan due to enjoying relative immunity from prosecution and repression (Kalkamanova and Otkulbek kyzy 2025). In the Soviet period, the tradition was repressed and co-opted into political propaganda (Kendirbaeva 1994, 175) but has regained its original traits in today’s Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Kalkamanova and Otkulbek kyzy 2025), very much in the spirit of retroactive anticolonialism.

Understanding this context behind Ismailov’s references to *aitys* (and his inclusion of several *aitys* of his own creation throughout the novella, itself an extended *aitys* of sorts) is important as it adds a further layer of nuance to Erzhan’s dissociation from the tradition following his exposure to radiation, or more broadly, Soviet colonialism. It also challenges the initial impression of the novella as essentially apolitical, as indeed conveyed in the otherwise insightful reading of the work by Eleanor Womack (2024), who argues that by the end of the narrative:

The story’s violence disappears entirely; the tragic events of the story are attributed to the unreal and the fantastical, rather than the concrete and the political, as Yerzhan gets subsumed into a larger canon of deities and “eternal boys,” rather than portrayed as a victim of a totalising faith in progress, no matter the cost.

On the contrary, rather than rendering the novella apolitical, ethnic myths and folklore are placed strategically throughout the novella to add a further layer to Ismailov’s anticolonial critique. Due to his colonial trauma, Erzhan is unable to reconstruct local traditions even when Soviet repression of these norms begins to retreat by the time he meets the narrator (which we can deduce is the late Soviet period). On the allegorical level, it is implied that by metaphorically abandoning *aitys*, with all its accompanying legends, Central Asia’s youth has lost collective memory and a sense of anchorage, unable to trace where they come from, like the fatherless Erzhan. The loss pertains not only to cultural memory, but also the historical one. Much like the narrative, and Erzhan himself, never solves the puzzle of the mysterious blasts, so, it is implied (and explicitly stated by the author in his interviews) that Kazakhs cannot, or

will not, remember their traumatic colonial past, similarly shrouded in taboo and mystery. In essence, Ismailov is the one who attempts to achieve this mission of reconstruction on behalf of his fictional character, by building on local myths, orality and musical traditions in crafting his post-Soviet ecopoetics. Again, one should note that he does so with sensitivity to his own status as the outsider (or at least not strictly an insider), as expressed in his choice of a fictional narrator who is sometimes unreliable and prejudiced.

All throughout, Erzhan perceives his environment through music. Growing up, he comes to associate the road he takes on his way to his violin lessons as a musical melody, "музыкой, такой же плавной и разнотонной", and one that is, moreover, turned into a harmonious polyphony when merged with the sounds of the wind on the local flora, and the voices of the various creatures inhabiting the steppe: "на кустиках жузуна и солянки качались ноты ветра, землеройки и суслики подпедали вторыми и третьими голосами" (41). Thus, his formation is accompanied with uplifting motifs, "безоблачных мотивов", linking childhood, music and environment. Even his friends and family, with their colourful personalities, acquire for him characteristics of some of the musical pieces by Brahms, Vivaldi and Pierre Gaviniès (41). Notably, only women, no doubt due to being traditionally perceived as carriers of tradition, are associated by Erzhan with specifically local music, "с однообразными звуками старинной домбры..." (41). It is not coincidental that as Erzhan's depression deepens after his contamination in the radioactive lake, he abandons violin (an allegory of Western progress) in favour of the native dombra (a symbol of local traditions). Ultimately, he gives up on music altogether, going symbolically "mute" like his mother, and his local landscape. The muteness of the feminine, and the muteness of the dombra thus serve as extended metaphors for the loss of traditional identity.

The key contrast leading to the haunting and pessimistic sentiment, on the literary level of the story's architectonics, and for Erzhan specifically, is conveyed through the sonic element in the background ("на фоне") of the harmonious music of childhood and nature. It is the "другая мелодия" – the destructive, disturbing sound coming from the zone, which "то едва слышно, то вдруг, непонятно с чего выступая на первый план", overtakes other melodies, introducing cacophony, "гулом, дрожью, а то и ураганом", in an otherwise harmonious order, both musical, and literal (41). Since childhood, Erzhan imagines hearing this sound as a metaphorical foreboding of some unknown evil, "ожидание чего то неминуемого, страшного, безобразного" (41). As such, when Erzhan's local environment, and by extension his identity, becomes endangered, he begins to be haunted by uncanny visions where both nature and musical sounds becoming threatening: "забытое звучание: 'Зона', и опять жужжащий овод закружил над его сознанием, приснившись ночью роем музыкальных нот и разбудив его утром огромной жужжащей мухой [...]" (23). Crucially, the alliteration and consonance of the letters "z" and "zh" in this sentence echo the similar pattern in an earlier foreboding ("ожидание ... безобразного") to heighten the sense of dread. The simile linking musical notes to a swarm of gadflies suggests the corruption of an otherwise comforting source – music, and by extension likens Erzhan to cattle. Crucially, this association blurs the boundary between the human and animal, hinting that both are equally helpless when falling prey to the destructive forces of the zone.

On a metaphorical level, Erzhan cannot imagine himself as separate from his native flora and fauna, and the local songs that foreground them. At one point after his exposure to radiation, he imagines being a straw going down the stream into nothingness:

Он вспоминал тот самый жыр, что дед пел в свое время Петко, о полых соломинках, текущих в потоке, биясь то о камень, то о ветку, склонившуюся над водой. Вот и он — такая же оборванная соломинка: то стукнется о камень, то о травинку, то о былинку, и как бы ни свистела-свиристела душа, а несет его поток к тому самому мертвому затону, где никакой живой травы, один ил. И все, что остается от этого пути — лишь дуновение воздуха сквозь полое нутро, напоминающее слабую, еле слышную песню... Жыр... (74-5).

The destination is the dead backwater with no living grass, and the weak, barely audible sound of the wind akin to the local song (“жыр”) that accompanies the movement is not the heartening, soothing sound of the dombra. This description of barrenness echoes the equation of the Central Asian steppe with emptiness in the Soviet “civilising the wilderness” narratives and puts into sharp relief its twisted logic. Progress, as understood in nuclear science, does not bring “life” to the desert, as in Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs about Lenin*, but rather quashes it. But while there is even a faint echo of music, there is still hope, and so Erzhan decides to bathe again in the dead lake, and while doing so, he imagines being tightened like his violin bow, hoping that soon enough “смычок коснется струн, и зазвучит музыка” (85). His imagined magical regeneration, thus imagined in musical terms, again foregrounds the primacy of music, and the ability to perform it, in Erzhan’s self-definition.

Erzhan’s inseparability from the natural world and music is again brought to the fore in his nightmares, which allow Ismailov to further extend his postcolonial ecocriticism. In these nightmares, the world of politics invades Erzhan’s private world in uncanny manifestations, or “the post-Soviet unhomely” characteristic of Central Asian postcolonial literature (Koplatadze 2019 a, 2025). Due to Erzhan’s constant exposure to daytime debates about the imminent Third World War, at night he sees silver planes turning into iron eagles that haunt him as if he were a little fox cub. The corruption of the natural world could not be conveyed in any more vivid terms here, with none other than a “беркут”, a bird of supreme symbolic importance to Central Asia, becoming threatening in its mechanical form – the unnatural image here suggesting the twisted nature of modernisation and scientific progress. Erzhan identifies directly with a fox, suggesting that his perception equates the harm to oneself with the harm done to the environment. Here too, Erzhan’s identity, nature, music, and politics are linked inextricably. As soon as he wakes up, Erzhan becomes fearful of something that appears more ‘terrifying’ than the actual nightmare itself: “Ержан просыпался весь в поту и, боясь шевельнуться, с ужасом думал: а на чьей же стороне его американец Дин рид?” (23). The possibility that his American musical idol might side with the West presents higher stakes for Erzhan than his own individual well-being, and additionally suggests that the corruption of nature, while terrifying, is tramped for him by the danger of the “corruption” of art, here microcosmically signified by Erzhan’s potentially spoiled enjoyment of music.

The episode preceding this nightmare, whereby Erzhan accompanies his grandfather Petko and Kepen on a foxhunt, perfectly encapsulates all elements of Ismailov’s ecopoetics so

far covered. The hunt is described in dramatic and auditorily vivid terms, hinting at the ultimate crescendo that would likely accompany the capture of the fox, with the hunter, riding on a horse, pouncing on his target “с оглушительным гиком и улюлюканьем, которые слились с улюлюканьем и гиком и Петко, и Кепека” (36). And yet, the dramaticism is unexpectedly dissipated, because as soon as the fox is captured, the hunters choose to set it free. It is implied that Erzhan, who has set out on the hunt with his heart “между азартом и жалостью”, is relieved by this act, having gazed at the fox’s “побежденные глаза, полные отчаяния и тоски” (36). There is a subtle, though very deliberate echo (in both literal and metaphorical terms) evoked here with the fate of the capture of the many inhabitants of the steppe during the Semipalatinsk tests, which were forcibly caged and tied down to the ground just before the explosions. A contrast is derived, therefore, between the near-sadistic disregard of Soviet scientists for the local habitat, victimised in the name of progress, and the philosophical empathy of the hunters who, relatively speaking, have no ethical obligation to free the fox. For the nuclear scientists, the aim – overtaking the U.S. – is justified by the means, as echoed in Shaken’s declaration that “взрывы нужны и для мирных целей, чтобы строить коммунизм!” (42). By contrast, for these hunters, the road to the aim is more important than the outcome itself (“цель – не цель а дорога к этой цели”, 36).

Ismailov’s ecopoetical message again rests on a crucial auditory link: the “оглушительный” sound with which the fox is caught was earlier associated with the atomic explosion (“Бомба!”, 26), and later in the novella, is again associated with the terrifying blast that catches Erzhan unawares: “земля начала трястись, раздалась громовые раскаты. . . Скрипка хрустнула, издала последний визг, и свирепый вихрь воздуха с оглушительным гиком пронесся, сбывая все над ним” (98). In another powerful auditory instance, the sound of the explosion here merges with the sounds from the wind, and the sound of Erzhan’s violin, which is metaphorically dying, thus foreboding the boy’s own tragic demise. Meanwhile, we learn that Erzhan’s donkey goes bald, and that a lone wolf is howling in the distance, further adding to the swan song of the local habitat. As such, Erzhan’s earlier identification with the fox in his nightmares eventually translates to the lived reality where both animals and humans are left similarly helpless by the blasts. Instead of spelling out this similarity, Ismailov is drawing strategic auditory parallels to foreground his ecocritical vision. While in episodes such as these, the political is seemingly absent, with a closer look at the text’s overall ecopoetics, its intertextuality, and its “multimedia” elements, we can understand how Ismailov’s retroactive anticolonial critique is conveyed subtly, without explicit reference to politics, and without the binary pitting of the Russian “coloniser” against the Central Asian “colonised”.

The novel becomes progressively quieter towards the end, its climax building up in different “movements”. Indeed, if sound is important in the novel, so is its opposite – silence. The nuclear zone is quiet “до звона в ушах” (82). This oxymoronic description subverts the traditional understanding of silence as a lack of sound, instead rewriting it as a different kind of sound that is overwhelmingly audible. Instead of being the silence associated with peace and serenity, it is the “жуткая тишина” that follows the blasts and silences all creatures in the vicinity, where “овцы не бляели, собаки не лаяли, ишаки не орали, и даже вездесущие мухи не жужжали” (57). As alluded to earlier, silence is what also links Erzhan’s mother’s tragic fate, and her muteness, to the fate of the local steppe. The dead lake is explicitly linked with the mother (“Не Мёртвое ли озеро билось в ней в эти мгновения?”, 82), and at one

point, Erzhan muses that if only her mother would speak up, and be freed of her disability, perhaps he too would be cured (82). Once Erzhan's despair due to his condition reaches its climax, silence also comes to represent the loss of identity (tied to his family connections and his musical ambitions), and disconnection from nature:

не только домбру и скрипку забыл он, не только деда, Петко и Дина Рида, но даже и Айсулу. Дорога к Мертвому озеру вдоль русла высохшей реки, дорога к самому сердцу этой молчаливой Зоны, стучала теперь однообразным голым ритмом и скачущего коня, и бьющегося сердца, и пульсирующего виска, и не было в этом ритме места никакой музыке (82-83).

The music “dries up”, like the river, and is reduced to the monotonous, “naked” rhythm – there is no place left for it. The rhythm is again oxymoronically associated here with vivacity and vitality, with the galloping horse's beating heart and pulsing temples carrying almost sensual connotations that only underline, through contrast, Erzhan's own unfulfilled masculine potential. As such, silence is also linked with male impotence accompanying the nuclear devastation that is prevalent in the novel.⁶

Conclusions

Having examined the *Dead Lake's* ecopoetics, its intertextuality, and its multimedia elements, it becomes clear that Ismailov's retroactive anticolonial critique, while conveyed subtly, is central to the function of the work. It is expressed in the aesthetics of “akyr zaman”, and “zar zaman”, which unearths Central Asia's anticolonial potential rooted in native myths and literary traditions. It is also present through elements of local folklore, such as ones drawn from Tengrianism, that are strategically placed to underline the postcolonial critique on how the decline of tradition – spiritual beliefs and nomadic practices, oral music and storytelling – is inseparable from environmental, or other forms of colonial exploitation. Most importantly, Ismailov's retroactive anticolonialism is expressed through a carefully crafted network – visual, auditory, linguistic and metaphorical – of multi-sensory motifs merging individual and national identities, the natural world, and the world of music.

It is important to note that the phenomenon of “post-Soviet ecopoetics” is not limited to Ismailov's works. While detailed exploration of other examples in Central Asian ecoculture falls beyond the remit of this article, and forms the analysis of my current monograph *Post-Soviet Ecopoetics*, I will nonetheless briefly draw readers' attention to a few examples. For instance, Darkestrah, a Kyrgyz pagan metal band that frequently use national folk musical instruments, reference shamanism and Tengrism in their lyrics, foreground environmental themes in their albums (for instance *Epos*, 2007, dedicated to Issyk-kul-Lake), embrace Central Asia's polyvocality (for instance *The Great Silk Road*, 2008), and practice transcultural solidarity (for example *Akyr Zaman/Tajer al Punqia*, 2019, co-written with Al-

⁶ For instance, uncle Кеpek remarks that “у мужиков уже не стоит!”, to which Shaken “стыдливо отводил глаза”, implying that the comment is true in his case (42).

Namrood, a Saudi Arabian metal band kept anonymous due to threat of death under the current regime). The band follows key characteristics and principles of post-Soviet eco-poetics: 1) merging sounds of music and nature, in this case Kyrgyz nature and metal; 2) unearthing of repressed memories, beliefs and folk traditions in Central Asia (both ethnic and polyvocal); 3) ecocritical and subversive ethos; 4) trans-cultural solidarity; and 5) pan-Turkic and pan-Turanist reception. As such the track "akyr zaman" (*Embrace of Memory*, 2005) incorporates sounds of a Tawny Owl in its intro, and, incidentally, much like Ismailov's novella, draws on the anti-colonial aesthetics of the eponymous akyr zaman, "end of the world". Similar eco-poetics characterise Kazakh composer Galya Bisengalieva's works, such as her album *Aralkum* (2020), evoking the Aral Sea and "the desolate landscapes formed from its disastrous shirking" (Bisengalieva), or her recent album *Polygon Reflections* (2024) (a remix of her earlier *Polygon*, 2023), which came out on 29 August, marking the day of the first nuclear test in Semipalatinsk, and incorporating collaborations with other ecocritically-minded creative artists, such as Kazakhstani poet Anuar Duisenbinov. Another interesting example is the T1/2 project by Kamila Narysheva and Vicky Clarke which uses sounds recorded on the former Semipalatinsk nuclear site as a medium for reflecting on collective trauma, historical memory, and invisible yet tangible legacies of radiation (and, more metaphorically, colonialism).

Postcolonial nationalism tends to favour and promote singleness – one identity, one growth pattern, and "specifically unitary or 'one-eyed' forms of consciousness" (Boehmer 2005, 39). And yet, the paradoxical retroactive anticolonialism in Central Asia represents a unique postcolonial situation whereby the relative weakness of nationalist anticolonial movements in the Soviet period has led to the development of a striking model of decoloniality in the post-Soviet period, one divorced from binary and hegemonic visions, and instead rooted in the pre-Soviet models of resistance and epistemological systems. As such, Central Asian creative artists are exposing the hitherto repressed stories of colonial violence while transcending the binaries of ethnicity and nationality, the Russian "coloniser" vs. the Central Asian "colonised", human vs. non-human, spoken vs. written, heard vs. felt, and promote a truly inclusive, locally developed vision of decolonial aesthetics in the post-Soviet space. I hope that, inspired by these fascinating cultural dynamics, future studies will probe for further insights that emerge at the intersection of history and literary studies, postcolonial studies, environmental studies, and sound studies, and shed more light on whether, and in what ways, eco-poetic decolonial aesthetics occur in other parts of the world, whether post-Soviet or postcolonial.

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