

“We’re with the people!” Place, nation, and political community in Kyrgyzstan’s 2010 “April events”

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research in the aftermath of political violence in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in April 2010, this article explores the intense and ambivalent sociality that emerges in contexts of dramatic political upheaval. It argues that public responses to these events orchestrated and channeled public emotion around claims of being “with the people” [*el menen*] in ways that are consequential for understanding the ethnicization of social life in Kyrgyzstan over subsequent weeks. Engaging with debates that have sought to explore the eventfulness of identity in moments of political upheaval, the article explores the intersections between place, political practice and collective mourning, and draws attention to the long-term political effects of short-lived political actions. In so doing, it contributes to the broader concerns of this special issue on futurity and belonging in Kyrgyzstan in two ways: by stressing the affective and contingent articulation and political community; and by exploring the role of grief in mobilizing and siting articulations of national membership – including in violently performative ways.

Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between political upheaval, urban space, and social boundary marking in Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek. My aim is to understand the ways in which peoplehood came to be articulated in Kyrgyzstan during a period of political crisis, and to consider the enduring effects of such instances of fleeting, but intensely felt, political engagement. In so doing, I seek to engage in a broader conversation about how we might attend, ethnographically and theoretically, to those moments when claims to be “with the people” (*el menen*) proliferate and reverberate: when political community comes to crystallize, suddenly and violently, along ethnic lines.

My ethnographic point of entry is a series of events that occurred in April-May 2010 in Bishkek. This was a period of unprecedented state violence in Kyrgyzstan’s independent history. Dozens of opposition demonstrators, protesting against corruption, nepotism and the privatization of state assets, were fired upon by government troops in front of the White House, the Kyrgyzstani seat of government. In what was quickly dubbed the “afternoon revolution” given the speed of government collapse, protesters stormed the White House, President Kurmanbek Bakiev fled the country, and an interim government was hastily convened.

This crisis of state had significant social and political antecedents. Bakiev had himself been propelled to power in a revolution in 2005, and the five years of his rule had been marked by growing social polarization and the privatization of formerly state assets. In one of the world’s most remittance-dependent states, the global financial crisis that translated into plummeting remittance transfers was exacerbated the overnight doubling of electricity rates (ahead of a planned privatization overseen by the President’s son), rapid inflation and a

punitive increase in customs dues from Russia. These events sent Bishkek's emergent middle-class back below the poverty line and left the rural and peri-urban poor having to choose between food and fuel. At the same time, the progressive concentration of economic and political power within the hands of the president and his extended family left ordinary people with a bitter contempt for the president and his stage-managed displays of social harmony. Towards the end of 2009, Freedom House downgraded its assessment of Kyrgyzstan from "partly free" to "unfree," putting this former "island of democracy" within the same political category as its authoritarian neighbours (Freedom House 2009).

At the same time, parliamentary powers were reduced under Bakiev's presidency, as were the political voices of Kyrgyzstan's diverse minority communities. The slogans that had characterized the presidency of Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akaev, which celebrated Kyrgyzstan, ideationally at least, as a "common home" (*obschii dom*) for a multi-ethnic population, were replaced by an emphasis on patriarchal values and deference to political authority. Agonistic politics was replaced by performative displays of unity. Indeed, one of the crucial precipitating factors for Bakiev's ouster was the hosting of a "Congress of Harmony" (*Yntymak kurultai*) on the anniversary of his own violent seizure of power in 2005, which was mirrored by an unsanctioned but politically transformative *kurultai* that united the political opposition and brought demonstrators onto the street (Reeves 2010).

These background events are critical for understanding the political crisis that engulfed Kyrgyzstan in April 2010 and for the social divisions that it came to crystallize. However, my primary focus in this paper is not the long history of social differentiation that has occurred in very visible form in Bishkek over the last decade, nor is my aim to unpack the unfolding dynamics of the April political crisis itself (for a chronology see ICG 2010). My concern is rather to capture something that many of my interlocutors were preoccupied with in the immediate aftermath of political crisis: the dynamic ethnicization of social life; the sense, that is, that political upheaval had led to a policing of social boundaries defined primarily by ethnicity and region.

In developing this argument I seek to contribute to debates about urban co-existence and what Arjun Appadurai has referred to in the context of Bombay as the "decosmopolitanization" of urban life brought about by structural inequalities and the increasing emphasis on sectarian difference within political discourse. Appadurai traces a double dynamic in the Bombay of the 1970s-1990s, the period that he identifies as critical to the process of urban transformation. On the one hand there is a "dematerialization" of the economy, leading to colossal disparities of wealth. On the other hand, there is a "hypermateralization" of the city's citizens through ethnic mobilization and public violence (2000: 630). Under the rule of President Bakiev, it would be possible to trace comparable dynamics: the erosion of trust in the rule of law, the polarization of wealth (and its increasing association with high state office), and the reproduction of a discourse of ethnic nationhood that reinforces the primacy of the ethnic Kyrgyz citizens of Kyrgyzstan. Appadurai's approach focuses attention on the structural preconditions for inter-communal and sectarian urban violence. Yet it has less to say about the dimension that I am primarily concerned to explore here—the dynamic intensification of political community at a moment of state crisis: the reverberation of certain visions of that community, the *Kyrgyz el* or Kyrgyz people within public space, and the silencing of others.

To explore these I turn to approaches that have sought to understand the material, institutional and social dynamics through which certain kinds of public come to be constituted—fleeting so, but no less consequentially for that; and the way that processes articulate with the material sites and infrastructures of the city. Through this analysis I develop two arguments in relation to the broader concerns of this Special Issue on futurity and belonging in Kyrgyzstan. First, I stress the intersections between place, praxis, and political belonging: that is, the way in which certain places became implicated in the articulation of political community based around ethnicity, urban membership, or exclusion from the ownership of land. Secondly, by focusing on the practical material engagements urban-dwellers made with these places (through guarding, defending, looting, seizing, or the production of improvised memorials), I inquire into the long-term political effects of short-term political actions. In so doing I argue for a more dynamic, contingent and materially grounded account of “peoplehood” and its articulation than that which has so far dominated in studies of Kyrgyzstan.

Belonging and the articulation of the “people”

My approach to this analysis is informed by two broad theoretical commitments. The first is that “belonging,” in Kyrgyzstan as anywhere else, is not ontologically given, but constituted relationally in particular social and material settings. The *el*, the “people,” is not a stable referent of political discourse or political action, but articulated in specific social and material settings. To note this is not to suggest that the category is therefore endlessly fluid or that it has no history. Rather, it draws attention on the ways in which particular claims of belonging circulate, and in so doing intensify and reverberate in different social arenas.

It is to inquire about *who* is being invoked in assertions of being “of the people” and “with the people”—who is excluded, and with what social consequences (see Ahmed 2003). It is also to recognize that in circulating—in the proliferation of *el*-assertions in rumor, graffiti, public memorials, political speeches, popular song and so forth—these claims to political membership *do* things; they resonate, they act on feelings, and shape future action. As Adi Kuntsman notes in her analysis of the intersections of the relations between on-line and off-line violence, “the notion of reverberation—as opposed to that of ‘representation’, ‘narration’ or ‘impact’—invites us to think not only about the movement of emotions and feelings...but also the multiplicity of effects such movements might entail” (2012: 1-2).

The second theoretical commitment is a concern to think together the intersections between materiality and human praxis at times of social and political upheaval. In this respect my approach is influenced by what has been glossed as a “material turn” in the study of political processes (Joyce and Bennett 2010); that is to say, a concern to recognize “the distinctive forms of agency and effectivity on the part of material forces” (2010:4). Such an approach does not ascribe intentionality to the material world. Instead it seeks to take seriously the way in which particular material formations, spatial and architectural arrangements, or technical assemblages are themselves implicated in processes of political praxis and subject formation.

This attentiveness to materiality has been particularly productive in recent concerns to understand ethnographically the production of state effects (Harvey 2005) and the role of

technical infrastructures in enabling and constraining a variety of governmental projects (Collier 2005; Mukerji 2010; Dunn 2008). My analysis here brings this recent interest in political praxis with older debates about the political articulation of community, by exploring the kinds of sociality—sometimes, fleeting, sometimes enduring—that are enabled by particular spatial and material arrangements. Specifically, I ask how competing conceptions of “peoplehood” came to be articulated in the aftermath of the April 2010 uprising in Kyrgyzstan; how some of these intensified, while others in turn came to be muted. My contention is that to understand the proliferating enactments of peoplehood during Kyrgyzstan’s “April events” (*aprel’ okuyasy*) we need to look as much to collective material practice as to political rhetoric—to understand how claims to be “with the people” (*el menen*) or “of the people” (*elden*) were sited and performed in place.

By “articulation” here, I want to signal two significant dimensions of the way peoplehood was being invoked. The first is the place of political contingency. For Stuart Hall, in his theoretical elaboration of the concept, articulation affords “both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain circumstances, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects” (Hall, interviewed in Grossman 1986: 53). In other words, it allows a way of appreciating the inherent contingency and fluidity of any given category of belonging (“the nation,” “the people”; “the tribe” and so on), without suggesting that it is somehow merely “fabricated,” or the outcome of deliberate ideological manipulation (see also Li 2000: 153).

Secondly, Hall’s concept draws attention to the political and economic conditions of possibility within which particular articulations occur. The possibilities for articulation are historically structured; for any individual, room for maneuver is “present but never unconstrained” (Li 2000: 153). As Hall puts it:

You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called unity of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements, which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary “belongingness”. The “unity” which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily be, connected (Hall interviewed in Grossman 1986: 53).

Integrating these insights concerning the contingent dynamics of articulation with a study of spatial praxis entails moving beyond the observation, well-made in studies of urban space and revolutionary politics, that the spatial and the social are mutually constitutive, to enquire into the material specificity of particular urban landscapes and their affordances: the difference that it makes to projects of urban protest, for instance, whether public space is open or enclosed; whether buildings are cased in metal or glass; made of mud or concrete; whether peri-urban space is wooded or covered in tarmac (see Harvey 2010; Kärholm 2007; Humphrey 2012). What, I ask, are the kinds of sociality that are fostered at the White House mourning-site, or in the subdued collective grief of a public burial in the windswept outskirts of the city? How are such sites efficacious in articulating nationhood in particular ways?

In their illuminating study of “barricades sociality” in Mexico and Latvia, Arenas and Dzenovska provide an example of what such approach, attuned to the social and affective affordances of place, might look like. In their study of barricade building in two contrasting political and historical settings, they urge us to ask how particular places can be considered consequential actants “in processes of the formation of particular social relations and political subjects” (Arenas and Dzenovska 2010: 181). They demonstrate how, during moments of popular uprising, the fact of building and defending barricades “produced an affective and visceral togetherness...that articulated the collective political subject of the people” (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012: 646). This “togetherness,” they argue, is inseparable from the material practice of the barricades—the processes of building, guarding, huddling—just as it is constituted by the reality that the barricade is a material assemblage that makes a particular claim upon public space through the disruption that it presents to habitual movement through the city through its transgression of routine and “normal” politics.

In the ethnography that follows I focus on three urban sites in which and through which competing visions of national (*eldik*) membership came to be articulated following the April uprising: (1) the gates outside the government building, the White House, which became a site at once for tributes to the dead, and of messages and banners claiming and contesting membership in the community of grief; (2) the memorial complex, *Ata Beiiit*, the “Fathers’ Cemetery,” where several of those who were killed by government troops were buried in a public ceremony that fused national mourning and political membership; and (3) the peri-urban outskirts of Bishkek, which became the site of extra-legal land seizures (*zakhvat*) by primarily rural, landless men and women demanding a claim to land in the name of the Kyrgyz people. Each of these sites represents a historically and culturally specific assemblage of political imaginaries, spatial and material practices and social relations. Each was also significant in the articulation of an ethnically and linguistically marked conception of nationhood with which many Bishkek residents only ambivalently identified.

Before focusing in on these sites, I begin with an ethnographic sketch of the events of April 2010 that gave them material significance.

“We’re with the People!”

April 8th, 2010. It is the morning after the worst night of political violence in Kyrgyzstan’s independent history. I joined 30-year old Bairam on his way to the square in front of the White House, the epicenter of an opposition demonstration the previous day which had been quashed with what, for this largely peaceful country, had been an unprecedented demonstration of state force. For many urbanites setting out to work on the morning of April 7th, the planned opposition march to the seat of government to protest nepotistic utility sell-offs and an overnight doubling in domestic gas prices had been just another demonstration in a city where road closures and protest marches had become unremarkable, if not routine. “It won’t be anything,” Mital, my landlord in Bishkek had told me that morning, after I had received a phone call from a friend in the southern city of Osh asking whether everything in Bishkek was quiet. “It’s just some Talas people getting angry because Sherniazov [an opposition activist from Talas region] was jailed.”

During the afternoon of the 7th, however, as the protest had grown in size and intensity, Mital had called me and instructed me to come home. In the early afternoon, phone connections were jammed from over-use, as schools closed early and parents were urged to take their children home to safety. Shops and cafes shut their doors; traffic jams lined the main roads out of the city center as people sought to retreat to the safety of peripheral residential micro-districts. A few hours later, as the demonstration in front of the White House swelled with new protestors who had been called by friends and relatives already at the square, government troops fired indiscriminately into the crowd from atop the government building. Eighty-six people were killed and hundreds injured, before the White House was stormed, President Bakiev fled the country (in circumstances that are still hotly disputed) and a “government of national unity” hastily convened (Orlov 2010).

In the hours following this bloodshed, as the national television station was seized by opposition supporters and TV stills of spring orchards gave way to an impromptu emergency broadcast, Bairam and I watched the seizure of the state being played out live on national television. Grainy mobile phone footage showed the White House being ransacked, the Security Service building being seized by opposition demonstrators, the district tax inspectorate set alight, and Manas airport being taken into opposition control. Ernest celebrations of the bravery of the martyrs (*sheittar*) who had given their lives to overthrow a discredited president were interspersed with scenes of the bloody chaos of political seizure: overcrowded hospitals; overwhelmed doctors shooing away camera crews; urgent requests for donations of blood and money.

With the implosion of central authority, hastily convened live television broadcasts became the site for a clamor of urban publics and for the condensation of densely circulating rumors. Had the water system been poisoned? Had Bakiev really fled to Kazakhstan in a helicopter? Had looters attacked TsUM, the Central Department Store and the prime landmark of modern, commercial, peaceful Bishkek? Text messages in Russian and Kyrgyz reporting on damage and exhorting restraint were sent to the station and displayed as a continuous ticker-tape accompaniment to the night’s broadcast. “Kök-Jar microdistrict is quiet. Almaz, look after yourself!” “How is TsUM. Still alive?” “People are roaming on the square like a herd of sheep,” “Deputies, where are you?” “Everything from Voentorg to Panfilov [Street] has been robbed”; “don’t touch ADIDAS!”; “Asalam aleikum, Kyrgyz brothers, we are all Muslims, calm yourselves”; “Madina [bazar] is looted”: “What’s happening around TsuM?” “we’ve gone back 10 years”; “Kyrgyz people, don’t succumb to looting!” (*Kyrgyz el maroderstvogo kol berbegile!*) And last of all just: “God save us” (*da khranit nas Bog*) (Fieldnotes 07.04.2010).

This night of seizure had been captured on camera, such that as we walked from his apartment to the center of town, Bairam and I, like the hundreds of others who had come out to look at the transformation of familiar landmarks, were primed for the site of crushed glass and burned out shops. But the events of April 7th had also, in a strange way, been foretold, or perhaps, more accurately, *forefelt*. Along our route there were reminders here of Kyrgyzstan’s “tulip revolution” five years earlier, when Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, had been forced from power with a similar show of popular force, but without the accompanying state violence (Marat 2006). Then, in an effort to fend off looting when the state is in retreat, the owners of shops, offices and cafes in central Bishkek covered their

property with the revolution's slogan, "we're with the people" (*biz el menen*) in paint, chalk, paper or whatever came to hand. This provided a ready script for the events of 2010. Rumors circulating for several days that the planned (but unsanctioned) opposition demonstration might turn violent led many shop-owners to clear out their wares and announce that their stores were empty. As though in a giddy, violent replay of 2005 the claim that "we are with the people" materialized again across the surface of the city: a mixture of defiant affiliation and a desperate plea to be left in peace by a fickle, angry crowd. As we walked to the main square, Bairam and I saw the slogan painted in huge letters on the market containers at the Madina bazar; scribbled in pen on the window of a bread shop; painted over the glass frontage of a jewelry store that had been the target of looting in 2005; even painted onto the back of a picture frame at the back gates of the White House. It was as though the whole city was claiming an affiliation to a "people" simultaneously exalted and feared.



But what is it, in the context of contemporary Bishkek, to be "with the people"? Linguistically it is an ambivalent assertion. A claim to be "with the people" is subtly different from an assertion that we "are the people". It signals a separation at the same time that it claims association. Like the term "people" in English, the *el* can signify both a political

community defined through their relation to a state (this is “the people” against “the regime”) and a community defined through shared origins, language, culture, or region. In the Kyrgyz language, the association of *el* with the qualifier Kyrgyz, (as in *Kyrgyz el*, the Kyrgyz nation or people)—points to a community that is linguistically and ethnically marked.¹ In 2005 the symbolic locus of the *Kyrgyz el* was in the south of the country – the heartland of the then opposition to Kyrgyzstan’s first President, Askar Akaev. In 2010 it was in the rural north, where opposition to Bakiev had been concentrated, and where, in the regional center of Talas, social concerns had first translated into political demands (to remove the regional governor), and eventually to collective violence. Many of the signs hastily mounted in Bishkek made that affiliation explicit. “The owner is from Talas” had been painted onto the window of a café to protect it from looting. “We’re with the people. This is a Kyrgyz shop” (*Kyrgyz düköñ*) read a paper sign taped to the inside of an electrical store – the message here (in Kyrgyz) contrasting with everything else about the store’s frontage, as well as its imported electrical goods. Claiming peoplehood offered protection, but it also provided legitimacy for revolutionary justice. In the scarred, burned-out town house of Maxim Bakiev, the president’s son, a wall-sized graffiti cursing the son-of-a-bitch Bakiev was signed off simply, ‘from the people’ (*ot naroda* in Russian) – a claim that at once anonymized and generalized the revolutionary seizure that had seen the house stripped bare.

For many self-identifying Bishkek urbanites, however, the young men who had thronged the city the previous day to demonstrate on behalf of the opposition were an *el* with whom they only conditionally identified. Amateur footage from the previous day’s demonstration revealed that the crowd that had gathered in the square shared a strikingly similar profile: young, male, Kyrgyz-speaking, rural. “Is this it, our people?” Gulnara, a University lecturer, later asked me. “Hungry, angry, jobless? What has happened to this generation?” Mital, who as a moderately high-placed official in the urban bureaucracy, had seen both his immediate boss (the district governor) and the city’s mayor fired from office overnight, was even more outspoken. Watching the evening news together two days after the coup, the sight of a landless young man justifying his seizure of land for housing on the outskirts of the city because “six of us currently share our one room,” prompted Mital to shout back in anger to the screen, “then get back to your village!” (*anda ailyna ket!*)

Even quietly spoken Bairam was angry as we walked towards the square, cursing those who had brought Kyrgyzstan “back ten years” by their actions and the corrupt leadership that had evoked such rage. Over the following days, as deaths came to be counted and memorialized, with photos of the deceased pinned to the outer gates of the White House, the profile of those killed in the uprising gained starker contours. All of the 86 who were killed by government marksmen on April 7th were male; many of them were still teenagers. Few were older than 40. Most were from villages in northern Kyrgyzstan who had traveled to Bishkek that morning responding to calls and text messages from friends and relatives who had gathered at the eastern end of the city to demonstrate. Others had come from the villages outside Bishkek and from the city’s sprawling migrant districts (*novostroiki*), which had grown to constitute almost a quarter of the city’s population by 2010.

All of the deceased, except two Korean journalists, were ethnically Kyrgyz – this in a country where Russians, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Dungans, Tatars and other minorities make up over a third of the population. The reasons for this are to be found, no doubt, in the role of

social networks, which mobilized along lines of kinship and region to bring people onto the streets at a moment of crisis - rather than in any expressly nationalist rhetoric on the part of the opposition. As Maya, a Russian-speaking lifelong resident of Bishkek pointed out to me, there were few Russians or Uzbeks on the square for the same reason that there were few long-time urban dwellers. This was, in an important sense, an uprising of rural and peri-urban Kyrgyz-speaking men. But the fact that it came to be identified, and was discursively reproduced, as an ethnically marked Kyrgyz tragedy was to be consequential for the social and symbolic memorialization of the victims' deaths over subsequent weeks. As one of the leaders of the opposition demonstration later commented to me, matter-of-factly: "this was a Kyrgyz revolution (*Kyrgyzdyn revoliutsiia boldu*). We called on Manas' spirit (*Manastyn dukhu chakyrdyk*) and he brought our *baatyr*s out."

Siting grief

In front of the White House the mood was tense with anger and grief. Groups of men and women huddled in groups, debating in raised voices the horrors of the previous day, pointing to bullet holes, cursing Bakiev. Others squatted in silence, surveying the ground and the looted stores that surrounded us for clues to understand and apportion blame. Others quietly grieved. Patches of blood and scattered clothing were still visible on the tarmac in front of the square. Flowers had been laid on the ground where people died; small sticks and ribbons of cotton marking out the area in spontaneous memorial. Amidst the grieving relatives, boys clambered onto the burned out remains of a lorry that had been used to ram the gates of the government building. Others climbed the railings to take photos on mobile phones of the fires still smoldering on the building's 7th floor—the seat of the presidential administration. A teenager in a tracksuit and cap showed his friends the booty he had retrieved from inside the White House: two white telephones; the headed notepaper of the presidential administration; an electric kettle. Beside me a man gestured behind to the Ilbirs factory, a Bishkek landmark transformed the previous day into a platform for sniper fire. "They shot from behind," he shouted to anyone who would listen. "That's why so many people have wounds in the back of the head. They'd got in foreigners, hired snipers. Estonian women and a black guy from Africa. They knew that only foreigners could be trusted to fire on us, the bastards (*svolochi*)".



Some are celebrating a victory of sorts. Amidst the crowd gathered closest to the gates I came across Kubanich, an old friend and long-time activist for the political opposition. This was his “third revolution,” he told me. He had been on this square in 1991 in opposition to the Communists, demanding land. He had been there in 2005 to call for Akaev’s resignation, and he had been there the previous day in support of the opposition’s demands for Bakiev to concede political power. “You saw it on TV, right? They were shooting at them, and the guys kept rushing forward, oblivious. Others, Russians, Kazakhs, would have run scared. Where else have the people got rid of two presidents in a row?” Kubanich spoke with a pride tempered by loss. Two young men from the migrant district where he lived had been killed in the shooting, one of whom he knew personally. In contrast with 2005, when the atmosphere following political seizure had been briefly euphoric – the “people” peacefully forcing a corrupt government from office—the atmosphere now was more one of numb disbelief. There were no victory opposition leaders to parade their revolution; no signs of the state either. Policemen had stayed at home; Mital, like other state employees, spent much of the day on the telephone, trying to establish how far down the urban administration “revolutionary justice” would extend.

In this immediate aftermath of conflict, there was a striking absence of symbolic unity. Tarmac and metal gates provided a material frame for spontaneous memorial. Flowers had been laid on the ground and pieces of white fabric tied to the metal gates as they would to the branches of trees at a mazar or sacred site. An icon and a candle had been placed on an upturned box taken from the White House, near to which an elderly woman sat reciting the Qur’an. By the following day, other objects had accumulated there: messages to the dead and letters “to the world” announcing that the young men’s death would not be in vain; poems in Russian and Kyrgyz, photos of the deceased, newspaper cuttings, more flowers, and a Soviet hammer and sickle flag. There was a visceral sense of grief and shock here that contrasted with the jubilant atmosphere that had followed the overthrow of Akaev five years earlier. But in those early days of spontaneous memorial the community of mourning was still undefined. Diverse articulations of belonging and grief here coincided: as kin, as co-ethnics,

as Muslims, as fellow residents of Bishkek. Work colleagues come to show their respects with their *kollektiv*; a group of doctors with their medical coats who had been treating the injured; school-children brought by mothers after school lay flowers and look, with fear and awe, at the black-rimmed portraits of the young men. Signs and banners came and went, some grieving, some raging.

I spent several afternoons at the square observing these spontaneous practices of memorialization, sometimes in the company of friends who went to pay their respects, sometimes alone. On the morning of April 8th a large banner in Russian tied to the gates of the White House proclaimed that “dirty Jews and those such as Maxim [Bakiev] have no place in Kyrgyzstan.” By the afternoon, the top half of the banner had been folded over so that Maxim, the President’s widely-despised son, was the sole target of vengeance. By the next day this sign has disappeared and another had taken its place memorializing “the youth who have sacrificed their life for the Kyrgyz people and the Kyrgyz land” [*Kyrgyz eli, jeri üchiün kurman bolgon jashtarga*]. For a brief few days, the gates of the White House provided a kind of open platform for expressions of grief, rage, and belonging. To the right of the gates the elderly woman with her Qur’an sat near to the young man waving his Soviet flag. To their left a group of men squat praying; to their right, several more have draped Kyrgyz flags around them—a metonymic link to the bodies of the dead now wrapped in flags and elevated to the status of national heroes. Memorials to those who died were coupled with painted signs avowing revenge. “Death to Bakiev’s family” (*Bakievdin üi-bölösünö ölüm!*) read a sign in red paint, to which someone else has added, in black paint, the name of Üsönov, the presidential chief of staff to Bakiev and Akaev before him. Loss and anger, love and hate here merged and magnified in the proliferation of signs.

Articulating the *el*

Over the following few days, however, there occurred a gradual closure of symbolic space. Particular signs came to proliferate and intensify; and the cacophony of voices given airtime in the initial aftermath of tragedy gave way to a more unified narrative of national – here *eldik*, Kyrgyz, suffering. On April 10th, a Saturday, 10,000 people gathered at Ata-Beiit, the Father’s Cemetery, on the outskirts of Bishkek to bury sixteen of the dead in a public funeral. Ata-Beiit is a place heavy with the memory of past grief, built to commemorate those who died in the purges and to memorialize the best sons and daughters of the nation. At the ceremony, bards singing improvised mourning laments, *koshok*, hailed the dead young men as *baatyr*s—warrior-heroes who had fought to defend the Kyrgyz nation. They placed a curse upon seven generations of Bakiev offspring. Members of the new interim government presiding at the ceremony celebrated the bravery that led men to keep running toward the White House in the face of sniper fire, and the nation for which they gave their lives. *Bakievge kul bolboibuz!* – “we won’t be slaves to Bakiev!”—they told the gathered mourners, echoing the phrase that had been used by demonstrators as they had marched to the government building.

In contrast to the careful bilingualism of most official ceremonies, where greetings and speeches are given in both Kyrgyz and Russian, the mortuary ceremony at Ata-Beiit was conducted entirely in Kyrgyz. The mourners were addressed from the podium as *tuugandar*,

as relatives, and as fellow muslims (*musulmandar*). Music, *koshoks*, and official speeches marked this out as a Kyrgyz ceremony for the Kyrgyz dead. But this was also emphatically a state occasion. The rows of corpses were draped in the national flag. The national anthem was played at the close of the ceremony. Addressing the grieving relatives and the crowd of onlookers, Roza Otunbaeva, the leader of the post-coup interim government, spoke of a nation's rage that would have to be avenged:

“The old powers, who had been brought to power on the 24th March 2005 through the force of the people, on the wave of the people [*eldin küchü menen, eldin tolkunu menen*], had become the enemy of the people [*eldin dushmany*] and have been overturned. They have to answer now before the Kyrgyz people [*Kyrgyz eline joop beresh kerek*].” (fieldnotes, 10.04.2010)

Otunbaeva's speech not only repeatedly invoked the *el* as the subject of mourning. It also fused the two versions of “peoplehood” (the “people” as the source of political legitimacy and the “people” as the ethnic Kyrgyz nation). The ceremony discursively articulated the *Kyrgyz el*, whose honor had to be avenged, as the subject of this trauma and as the source of the state's legitimacy. In the days that followed, as the burial was replayed on national television and Bishkek slowly returned to a nervous semblance of pre-coup routine, the effects of that fusion were palpable. At the northern and southern perimeters of Bishkek, in parkland, fields and pasture dotted with the villas of the new rich, landless families (and no doubt a fair few *spekulanty*, “speculators”) staked out the sites of future land-plots with metal rods and string. In the days following the April coup, swathes of land were claimed in this way: marked out with yurts and tents until the foundation of more permanent homes could be laid. The logic echoed Otunbaeva's speech at the funeral: this was a people's victory and the people should be appeased. As the banner hoisted to one of the yurts in a self-declared new neighborhood asserted in defiant capitals: “The master of the land is the people” (*jerdin eesi-el!*)

In subsequent days, as the land seizures spread from the south of the city to the north, encroaching more on sown fields and privately-owned land, tension over quite *who* was discursively included here in the *el* entitled to land grew to occasionally violent dimensions. On April 19th, less than two weeks after the overthrow of the government, a group of landless men seized 700 hectares of sown fields for future land plots outside the village of Maevka, on the northern outskirts of Bishkek. The land here had been farmed by Meskhetian Turks, whose parents and grandparents had been deported to Kyrgyzstan from Georgia in 1944 at the height of Stalin's war-time ethnic cleansing of alleged “collaborator” populations. Two generations later, many descendants of these deported families had become locally wealthy, farming several hectares of land. This fact, widely known but not previously the object of political discourse or popular antagonism became, in this period of *el*-articulation, the locus of intense public discussion and a discursive legitimation for extra-legal seizure. “Our reasons for coming here,” one of the young men staking out a land plot on a sown field commented to camera two weeks after the coup, “is that the Turks [*Türktör*] here have each received 4 or 5 hectares of land, whilst the Kyrgyz youth who are from here [*bierden*

Kyrgyzdyn jashtary] are waiting for years, unable to get even 4 sotik of land. That's why we've come out, all of us."

As the Maevka land seizures escalated into violence over subsequent days, leaving two people dead and several homes destroyed, rumors circulated thick and fast throughout Bishkek about who the next target of violence might be. In districts with significant Russian populations, leaflets were reportedly posted urging Russians to sell out quick and return to their "motherland" (*rodina*). Bairam, like many bilingual adults of his generation and urban background, condemned those who threatened Bishkek's peaceful internationalism, but he also made a point of deliberately speaking Kyrgyz in public space. "Peoplehood" was becoming ethnically marked, even as the provisional government urged "harmony" (*yntymak*) and the leader of the Meskhetian Turkish community, Murafidin Sakhimov, cautioned people "not to give in to provocation":

I would ask people not to turn interpret what happened in Maevka along interethnic lines (*v mezhnatsional'noe ruslo*). On that day Turks, Russians, Kyrgyz and other nations went out shoulder to shoulder to defend their village. We were once deported from south Georgia and Kyrgyzstan welcomed us, Kyrgyz shared shelter and bread with us. We consider this our home and our motherland. (Trend.az 21.04.2010)

In one sense, Sakhimov's emphasis was accurate: land around the village of Maevka was seized for the same reason that land everywhere else at Bishkek's perimeter was being seized. This land-grab in a moment of political crisis and a collapse in state authority was motivated less by inter-ethnic animosity than unequal distribution of resources, chronic poverty and the legitimation of extra-legal force. But in the context of post-coup Bishkek, ethnicity provided a productive interpretive lens, so that of all the dimensions that might be used to interpret the conflict between the *zakhvatchiki* and the Maevka residents (poor versus wealthy, rural versus urban, landless versus landowning), it was ethnic difference that came to structure its interpretation and provide a frame for future action.

The cumulative impact of the 7th April violence, the public burial of the deceased with its elevation of those who died to national heroes, and the clashes in Maeva two weeks later was to give discursive saliency to ethnicity as the primary vehicle for expressing political community. The gates outside the White House, covered in expressions of mourning, captured this transformation in the legitimate expression of belonging particularly vividly, as impromptu personalized expressions of grief gave way to commercially-produced banners in fabric and plastic. Following the Maevka events, new signs appeared: "The Dungans grieve for the dead of April 7th," read one. On another it was the Ingush expressing their solidarity for the heroes of the revolution. Even the Dargin and Avars, minorities numbering only a few thousand in Kyrgyzstan, had their own sign in place by the end of the month, grieving the dead and promising to build a new democratic society "with all the peoples of our country" [*so vseimi narodami nashei strany*].

Moreover, even as such signs articulated, in Russian, a message of unity through diversity, those in Kyrgyz hailed a more exclusive vision of political community. "Generous Russians, Hardworking Uzbeks, Centuries-old Uighurs, Agricultural Dungans, Mountain

Caucasian Brothers, Hospitable Kyrgyz: We are United, We are Together, Our country is Kyrgyzstan” read one 2-metre high sign that was tied to the White House gates in late April. Next to it, in Kyrgyz, was another: “Let it not be forgotten: You are Kyrgyz, I am Kyrgyz, Our Fatherland is Kyrgyz. You are Manas, the people is Manas, the Home of Ala-Too is Talas”. These two signs, sponsored by the same Talas-based organization would seem, at one level, to be in tension, even contradictory. The first is outward-looking, inclusive; the second ethnically exclusive. And yet, although they occupy different registers and address a dramatically different “you” in a different language, they share a similar structural logic. In each case the basis of identification is the ethnic group; in each it is as members of an essential and unambiguous community that it is possible to express solidarity.

Writing at the end of April 2010, Nina Bagdasarova, a University teacher of mixed ethnic heritage, and lifelong Bishkek resident who has actively resisted the incitement to speak in “ethnic” terms in her scholarship and activism, noted poignantly the way in which such appeals served to mark her and others like her as “minorities”. “There are more than 80 ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan; will there be 80 signs by next week?” Bagdasarova wrote, describing the mourning area in front of the White House. “Why can’t I express sorrow simply as a citizen? Why can’t I help collect money for families of the dead in private? [...] Suddenly, many of us are beginning to feel like minorities. [...] *I can not recall such a feeling in 2005.*” (Bagdasarova 2010: 12, original emphasis).

Bagdasarova’s reflections critique the proliferation of a language of ethnicity at a time when all are grieving: must Kyrgyzstan’s 80 ethnic groups each mourn separately? But her reflections also highlight the political effects of this dynamic. The parceling of grief, such that as a non-Kyrgyz she can only sympathize *with*, and not as part of a political community united by grief, constrains action and excludes membership. Gestures of friendship or solidarity in this ethnicized environment are always-already the gestures of someone marked as outside the community of suffering. Most poignantly, perhaps, Bagdasarova’s depiction captures a moment of interpolation that cannot be resisted – “many of us are beginning to feel like minorities”. Here, in this statement of frustration, is captured the whole dynamic of the preceding few weeks: of belonging and non-belonging being performed, sometimes violently, into existence with unpredictable effects.

Overcome by nationhood?

This sense of being at once subject to and compelled by structures that one cannot fully resist reminds of Slavenca Drakulic’s evocative comment, in her account of the first Balkan war, of being “pinned to the wall of nationhood”: reduced to a “single dimension” by the fact of war and the break-up of Yugoslavia along ethno-national lines. “Whereas before I was defined by my education, my job, my ideas, my character—and yes, my nation too.” Drakulic wrote of her experience at that time, “now I feel stripped of all that” (1993: 51). Bagdasarova’s comment similarly points to the complex temporality of peoplehood: its capacity to “happen,” to seemingly crystallize at moments of heightened tension.

Writing in the wake of the Balkan wars, sociologist Rogers Brubaker proposed that one of the ways that we could interrogate nationalism without essentializing nation was to explore nationhood as a “contingent event”. Brubaker’s claim – less developed and less

influential than the two other approaches he articulated in the same paper (to examine nationhood as “institutionalized form” and as “practical category”) – dwells on precisely the difficulty of trying to understand the moments of sudden intensification that characterized the Yugoslav wars. “I know of no sustained analytical discussion of nationness as an event,” Brubaker argues, “as something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action, rather than as a relatively stable product of deeply developmental trends in economy, polity or culture” (1996: 19). Nationhood, he argued, following Craig Calhoun, “should be understood as a ‘changeable product of collective action’, not as its stable underlying cause” (1996: 20).

This is a compelling assertion – and one that I find intuitively appealing for thinking about the events of April 2010 in Bishkek. But it remains rather undeveloped in Brubaker’s account; the mechanism at stake, mysterious. What actually is occurring in these moments of sudden intensification, as Drakulic experienced it in 1991 or Bagdasarova in 2010? Arenas and Dzenovska’s attention to the intense, affective dimension of particular socio-spatial enactments provides, I think, a generative tool for exploring these dynamics. Barricade-building, they argue, fosters a particular kind of “visceral togetherness” that is embodied and emotive. It draws attention to non-discursive processes of people-articulation, as well as the mutability of the category of peoplehood itself. In Latvia, for instance, Dzenowska demonstrates how the initial moment of barricades sociality was expressly non-ethnic. The *tauta*, the Latvian “people,” that was being articulated in the space of the barricades, included people of all social groups and diverse ethnic backgrounds (2012: 651), even as subsequent Latvian politics was increasingly premised on a distinction between those granted citizenship and those denied it.

In Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the affective registers and political possibilities were very different from Latvia in 1991. What was being enacted in the mounting of spontaneous memorials or the tracing out of future land plots was less a collective sense of hope at the prospect of a future democratic politics (the “people” fighting the oppressive Soviet state as was occurring in Riga in 1991) so much as grief, rage and indignation at the unprecedented use of force by a president who had lost his popular mandate. The parallels with the “barricades sociality” depicted in Mexico and Latvia can only then, be taken so far. But what this approach usefully points to is both the need to take seriously these contingent, socially charged moments of *el*-articulation, and their enduring effects. During Latvia’s 2007 gay pride march, for instance, Dzenovska’s informants alluded to the “barricade feeling” that they associated with 1991. In Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the dynamic of anticipation and response was already shaped by the fact of “revolutionary” seizure of the White House in the face of a discredited President five years earlier. The assertions of being “with the people” (*el menen*), hastily painted onto shops and shipping containers to protect them from looting, explicitly invoked this earlier spirit of collective (and defensive) sociality.

Within this constellation, the constitutive role of collective grief in mobilizing political community deserves particular note. In her study of “frames of war,” Judith Butler points precisely to the politicizing role of grief. “Many people think that grief is privatizing,” Butler argues: “that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this

first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (2009:22). In the process of memorializing those killed by government force on April 7th 2010, I have suggested, *particular* relational ties—those that marked out a community of religion, language and ethnicity; those which fused *el* with the qualifier *Kyrgyz*, came to be sited and reproduced, and others muted. This is not to say that those defined as outside the ethnic Kyrgyz nation could not, or did not grieve. Indeed, as we saw with Bagdasarova’s comment, ethnic Russians and other communities were very publically invited to demonstrate support for the families of those killed, but as members of “other,” minority communities, not as part of the *el* that is suffering. It is this refusal that elicits the question: “why can’t I express sorrow simply as a citizen?” and which prompted the proliferation of public expressions of grief articulated along ethnic lines (“the Dungans of Kyrgyzstan grieve with all the peoples of Kyrgyzstan.”)

What emerged over the days and weeks following the April 7th bloodshed, then, was a specific, contingent and socially situated articulation of peoplehood. It was contingent to the degree that this articulation—this fusing of *el* with *Kyrgyz* defined through ethnicity and language, and its identification as the source of political legitimacy (the “people” whose hurt has to be avenged, in Otunbaeva’s words)—was not pre-ordained or deliberately orchestrated; it intensified through the circulation of signs (“we’re with the people”), rumors, expressions of grief, and performative acts which, in a moment of state weakness, routinized violent acts of exclusion and extra-legal seizure.

To note this contingency is not to say that this articulation came from nowhere or that it has no history. The historical, cultural and linguistic specificity of the *Kyrgyz el* has been reproduced in official histories and popular genealogies, just as it has been memorialized in state iconography and public art (see, e.g. Gullete 2010 for an analysis). It is a socially resonant category of everyday practice. Moreover, there are structural reasons why the majority of those protesting on the square in front of the White House shared similar demographic characteristics, and why there were few Russian-speaking urbanites among them. As Mathijs Pelkmans wrote in 2005, “revolution” in Kyrgyzstan needs to be situated within the context of broken democratic promises, widespread impoverishment and the asymmetrical effects of neo-liberal reforms (Pelkmans 2005: 148) which have, among other effects, serve to politicize differences between “northerner” and “southerners,” and between Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Russians. But acknowledging these preconditions, which certainly deserve restatement in a Kyrgyzstani context, does not in itself explain why, in the aftermath of political crisis, a particular, circumscribed articulation of ethnic nationhood came to intensify and gain in social salience – nor why many people came to feel themselves “pinned to the wall of nationhood” with all the compulsion and constraint of personal agency that this phrasing suggests. For this, we need a more dynamic account, one attentive on the one hand to the contingency of political violence, the mobilizing effects of collective emotion and the densely-circulating calls for retribution, and simultaneously attuned to the way in which these affective intensities circulate and reverberate in the spaces of the city, muting articulations of political community that were not framed in ethnic terms.

Coda: belonging and political futures in Kyrgyzstan

In concluding, I want to bring this discussion back to the broader concerns of this special issue with future and belonging in Kyrgyzstan. Recent scholarship has explored several dimensions of what Svetlana Jacquesson (2008) evocatively calls “sore zones of Kyrgyz identity”: those social sites and collective practices that tend to condense debate about what it is to be Kyrgyz and/or Kyrgyzstani. These have included, among other topics, discussions of local-history writing and collective memory, geopolitical imaginations, language policy, ritual practice, shrine-visitation, and the enduring relevance (or not) of “tribal” affiliation (see, for instance, Borbieva 2014, Mostowlansky 2012, Hardenburg 2012, Megoran 2005, Korth 2005, McBrien 2006, Gullette 2010). We could characterize post-revolutionary praxis, whether in the form of guarding or seizing land, mounting memorials or commemorating the dead, as another such site of contestation over who is properly inside the *Kyrgyz el* articulated as the subject of grief.

What I have sought to stress in this article, however, is an attentiveness to the temporal dynamics of political community: the capacity of the *el* to be suddenly, even violently, articulated in moments of political upheaval; the capacity to be “overcome by nationhood”. Much discussion of ethnonationalism in Kyrgyzstan operates with an understanding of political community that characterizes it either as the outcome of enduring historical processes (that have, for instance, institutionalized and reproduced ethnic differences in education, language policy, and the everyday work of certifying one’s identity in state institutions), as the tool of political manipulation, or as pent-up force waiting to emerge as soon as political pressure is lifted. Writing in the wake of the ethnically-marked violence that consumed Kyrgyzstan’s second city of Osh just two months after the events described in this article, for instance, Alisher Khamidov and Erica Marat asserted that “Bakiev’s downfall opened a floodgate of pent-up ethnic tension created by years of biased government policies and ushered in the inter-ethnic clashes of June 2010.”

My argument does not dispute the antagonizing effects of Bakiev’s policies; nor the structural inequalities that have led many ethnic Kyrgyz to understand themselves to constitute a marginalized minority within the country’s social and political life (for an insightful discussion of which, see Megoran 2012, Laruelle 2012). Rather, what I have sought to convey here is a moment of intensification, when discussion about membership “in” the nation and “with” the nation that is grieving circulates and reverberates in and through public space. Characterizing ethnic belonging as a “pent-up force” awaiting expression as soon as the lid of political repression is lifted ignores the constitutive role of political action *itself* in fostering *el*-articulation: the visceral belonging that can crystallize in moments of crowd-chanting, stone-throwing, barricade-building—and even in collective grieving for fallen heroes.

Attending to such dynamics is important, I suggest, for developing a more differentiated and temporally-nuanced understanding of belonging; and specifically here for understanding how, in a context of political vacuum and the normalization of extra-legal violence, national membership came to be articulated in sometimes violently exclusive ways in the weeks and months following the April uprising.

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Notes

¹ By contrast the constitution speaks of the *Kyrgyzstandyn eli*, the “people of Kyrgyzstan” as the source of the state’s political legitimacy.

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