

Shouting absences: Disentangling the ghosts of Ukraine in occupied Crimea

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to illuminate absences in the semiotic landscape of Crimea, resulting from the erasure of Ukraine after Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014. By foregrounding what is NOT there, the study expands semiotic landscapes studies and critical sociolinguistic research more generally by interrogating absence and its haunting effects. More than 3,500 photographs of semiotic landscapes collected over two months of fieldwork between 2017 and 2019 together with fieldnotes serve as ethnographic data. The production of absence is interrogated through an analysis of its material effects, that is, voids, holes, and blank walls. It concludes that erasure does not simply negate Ukraine. Instead, pasts remain present, visible, and audible in semiotic landscapes. Absences, as part of a relational ontology of materiality, discourse, and affect, shout about complex invisibilized histories of violence. In this way, they suggest the need to probe traditional approaches in semiotic landscape research that rely on an ontology of presence. (Absence, trace, materiality, ghost, spectre, haunting, Crimea, Ukraine, semiotic landscape, linguistic landscape, interdiscursivity)*

SENSING GHOSTS

Waiting for my lunch in a Georgian restaurant in Simferopol, I am struck. This music. Why is it here?

I could not think of anything but that music. In no other places had I encountered Ukrainian music in Crimea up until that moment. All of a sudden, I wondered how it had galvanised my attention. I started searching for other signs of difference in space. And I found it. The Ukrainian word *вихід* 'exit' appeared on the wall. That was the only material trace I could see there. 'Perhaps, the rest was hidden by the layer of plaster', I thought. Now, it is invisible. Nothing reminds of the past if not for that song, if not for that exit plate (2019, from my diary).

Material traces encountered during my fieldwork in Crimea, five years after the peninsula became a de facto Russian enclave, were 'not indifferent' to the absence of Ukraine. Its uncanny presence was everywhere, sometimes with a stronger, sometimes weaker intensity. The Ukrainian music took me by surprise. A ghost of that Ukrainian time and space, its audible trace, exerted bewilderment. The

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music disturbed the present of the café with its lyrics, announcing a ‘spatially pervasive return’ (Gordillo 2021:36) of what seemed to be gone.

Indeed, setting out to investigate semiotic landscapes in Crimea after its annexation, ghosts would follow in my footsteps. But sometimes, spectres appeared in the most unexpected moments, such as the one described above. Spectres were everywhere. They were in landscapes, in people’s narratives, in movements. People learned not to see them, not to pay attention to them, not to name them.

The aim of this article is to explore the semiotic landscapes created by spectres. Beyond visibility and representation, some semiotic landscapes scholars have accounted for other senses, such as smell (Pennycook & Otsuji 2015), sound (Hu 2018; Schulte 2021) or even absence of sound, such as silence (Jaworski 2018), thus decentring from the principal role of visible, material, corporeal, or linguistic signs. This article attempts to go a step further and explores spectral landscapes that emerge through haunting, bringing to life the ghosts of Ukraine. Building on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Crimea in the aftermath of its occupation by Russia in 2014, I analyse a collection of approximately 3,500 photographs of semiotic landscapes taken in September and October 2019. For this study, sixteen photographs of public spaces in three Crimean cities and one settlement—Yevpatoria, Simferopol, Sevastopol, Gvardejskoe—including photographs taken in two museums and an educational institution in Simferopol, as well as my fieldwork diary and fieldnotes, comprise my ethnographic data. Though the researcher’s engagement with project participants (eleven ethnographic interviews and six walking tours) remains an important backdrop, this study puts emphasis on the researcher’s subjectivities, memories, and affective and bodily (in)capabilities (cf. Stroud, Williams, & Peck 2019) as resources that allow the mediation and disentangling of the ghosts. I argue that Ukraine, or rather its spectres, persist despite the attempts to silence its presence in the occupied territory.

Extending previous research in semiotic landscapes, this article offers a sociolinguistic analysis of ghosts and haunting. By capturing what seems absent from landscapes, it exposes ‘subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault 1982) and works against an ‘epistemology of blindness’ (Gordon 2008:xix, 207), thus suggesting new ways of seeing and knowing differently. In semiotic landscapes scholarship, there has been some interest in the workings of enforced material absences and its implications for individuals’ lives (Borba 2018; Guissemo 2018; Bock & Stroud 2019; Peck, Stroud, & Williams 2019; Björkvall & Archer 2022). In particular, research by Bock & Stroud (2019) offers an analysis of the evocative landscapes of apartheid, which, in spite of the abolition of apartheid in the early 1990s, persist and disturb contemporary South Africa. Drawing upon Bock & Stroud (2019), in this article I scrutinize the ways the Ukrainian present has been made past in Crimea and explore how the ghosts of Ukrainian statehood make themselves apparent during the fieldwork—despite the attempts undertaken to vanquish them from the landscapes of Crimea.

Overall, this article aims to show that the absences produced through acts of erasure are never really silenced. Rather, absences have a capacity to speak and to affect: absences pervade the present through the traces outlasting the violent acts. Entangled with materiality of grim histories and individual subjectivities, absences may animate ghosts, discharge positive pressure on human bodies, and speak their own language.

In the next sections, after a brief introduction to the Crimean conflict, the absences and spectres of Ukraine are further unpacked and made (in)to matter in relation to semiotic landscapes research. I then proceed with an analysis of five categories of what I call *vibrant voids*. I show that the ghosts of Ukraine are sensed in/through holes, shades, and shadows, in obscured material traces on walls, in decaying semiotic landscapes, in museum exhibitions, as well as in material omissions in discursive detachments in places where Ukraine is put ‘on display’. I provide a synopsis of the article by presenting a discussion of absences and their potential to probe traditional approaches in semiotic landscapes research—approaches which rely on an ontology of presence. Finally, the article ends with a conclusion.

GLIMPSES INTO THE CRIMEAN CRISIS

The Maidan revolution, also known as the ‘Revolution of Dignity’, broke out in November 2013 in Ukraine and served as the background for Russia’s temporary occupation of Crimea. The Crimean annexation followed a disputed and internationally unrecognized referendum. During this referendum, the inhabitants of Crimea were asked to vote on changes to their constitution, that is, remaining with Ukraine or ceding control to Russia. The referendum took place on the 16th of March 2014 across Crimea and was carried out under the control of armed Russian troops. Considering the heavy military presence and the absence of any international observers (Weisflog 2014), it is hardly surprising that 96.8% of the Crimean residents were said to cast a vote for the ‘reunification of Crimea with Russia’. At that point in time, nothing seemed to hinder the integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation, which included incorporating Crimea into the economic, financial, and legal systems of Russia.

Since this fraudulent event, the public spaces of Crimea have undergone massive redesign. Both the symbolic and physical meanings of Crimean spaces have been strongly saturated with ideologies of Russian nationalism, whilst any signs betraying the status of the peninsula as non-Russian have been subjected to cleansing (Volvach 2019). Given that Ukraine as a state was seen as an ideological competitor to what was becoming Russian Crimea, the indexical links with what was supposed to be ‘Ukraine’ were subject to erasure. In relation to semiotic or language ideologies, *erasure* is defined as ‘the process in which ideology, in simplifying the field of linguistic practices, renders some persons or activities or sociolinguistic phenomena invisible’ (Gal & Irvine 1995:992). Indeed, erasure directed against the Ukrainian citizens and the Ukrainian state in Crimea resulted in their invisibilization in

the material world of occupied Crimea. Consequently, the Ukrainian language, its speakers, and their ways of knowing and being were ‘absenced’ (Malinowski 2019:224) from the spaces previously recognized as Ukrainian.

ABSENCES AND SPECTRES OF UKRAINE IN
OCCUPIED CRIMEA

Pervasive absence

In extract (1), the experiences of Petra, a female participant in the project, capture well the significance of landscapes of absence.

(1) Petra, October 2019

I want to draw your attention to these blank walls. The thing is that a few years ago they were bursting with colour. Here you could have seen a lot of drawings made by children, because there was a competition. The pictures on the walls were about friendship, about love for the motherland etc. Of course, as these walls are pretty big and a lot of people see them, sometimes, different pictures telling different stories appear here. When I heard about your research, first, I wanted to take pictures of the walls, but how surprised I was, when I found them as white as snow. It’s interesting, because even though I pass them every day, I didn’t notice that the pictures disappeared.

Petra was about to take a photograph of the pictures on the wall, as she had to establish that what she was searching for had already gone. The pictures had disappeared. But the blank wall (Figure 1) was still explicit in its clear denial of previous signs ‘unwelcome’ in this present space. Petra mentions the transgressive character



FIGURE 1. A blank wall which used to burst with colours. Simferopol, 2019. Reproduced with permission from the participant.

of the ‘different pictures telling different stories’ (extract (1)). The children’s pictures were said to be dedicated to the ‘Motherland’ or differently put, to the ‘Other’, Ukrainian, state and these were among the reasons they were removed.

We could forget this wall, as it would seem to be insignificant due to its lack of visible transgression, outspoken inscriptions, or even other signs beyond its blankness (Karlander 2019; Moore 2019; Bendl 2019; Banda & Jimaima 2019). At first sight, there is seemingly ‘nothing’—nothing that would allow us to make conclusions about any diachronic layering of prior discourses (cf. e.g. Blommaert 2005). Petra’s memories about the wall and its history are the only tangible discursively produced evidence at hand. Still, despite the present blankness, much seems to be going on with this wall: Petra’s engagement with it, the affective charge the wall produces, the pictures painted, and, today, their absence, stress the importance of this object. Children’s activities oriented towards the wall, including the affective messages of love and friendship then ingrained and now absent, together with Petra’s re-experience of the past, which this wall brings to life, indicate that this wall cannot simply be dismissed as a silent slab of concrete. The social life, the relationships of the wall with the people, as well as the meanings jointly produced by the then vivid and now blank wall, are too rich to be dismissed.

A sign of erasure in the Crimean semiotic landscape—previously seen as the blankness of a wall—was a ghost, ‘the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place’ (Gordon 2008:8). For Petra, what seemed not to be there any longer was revived when she encountered that space again. The ghost was haunting, and that haunting was ‘a very particular way of knowing what has happened or [wa]s happening’ (2008:8). The sign of absence animated a ghost from the past that then seemed to be gone. That ghost appeared to Petra as she approached the wall. Another past became re-animated—not simply remembered—as she faced the wall and became aware of change. The object, its blankness, was made by her to matter.

Absences and presences in semiotic landscapes

Petra’s lived experiences offer an important starting point for a sociolinguistic inquiry of ghosts and haunting that is further developed below. By focusing on social phenomena that betray what is ‘missing’—‘appear to be invisible or [lie] in the shadows’ (Gordon 2008:15)—this article adds to the semiotic landscapes scholarship of uneasy places that have endured denial, trauma, dispossession, and colonial ruination by drawing insights from the research on vibrant matters, material debris, and the afterlives of destruction (Schwenkel 2017; Pardue 2018; Gordillo 2021; Judin 2021; Stoler 2021). This study insists that destroyed and annihilated landscapes are not dead matter, but rather lively and charged with affect. Following this line of thought, landscapes may evoke ghostly presences and act upon subjectivities. As research in materiality studies has shown, even when touched by violence and destruction, material worlds are not fully negated

or erased. Rather, these attempted erasures create certain afterlife-worlds, which continue to affect and shape individual experiences of places (cf. Sumartojo 2016; Wee 2016). The potential of materialities to become and speak out various histories, even amidst destruction, is always present, as ‘there is no such thing as an empty space’ (Perini 2020:89). For example, in the context of the Cyprus conflict, objects abandoned by Greek-Cypriots could establish contact with newly arrived Turkish-Cypriots settlers. Working as an ‘emergent property of extensive assemblages that construct affective atmospheres’ (Wetherell 2013:350), material objects, the ‘stuff’ that remained upon departure, could discharge feelings of abjectness and melancholy (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2009:11), reasserting the affective capacities of objects and material environments.

As for individuals’ experiences of evocative landscapes, Bock & Stroud (2019) argued that pervasive, and yet invisible, places of apartheid persisted in the imaginaries of young South Africans today. The authors conceptualized such hauntings as *zombie landscapes*, that is, ‘constellations of place and subjectivities’, ‘reconstructed and imagined landscapes, pieced together through traces of memory and the visceralities of affect these memories call forth’ (Bock & Stroud 2019:7). Through focus-group discussions, Bock & Stroud could see the zombie landscapes re-emerge as externalized places of the apartheid regime. Such places were said to remain hauntingly present even though the institutionalized system of racial segregation ought to have long been forgotten in South Africa.

Bock & Stroud (2019) ground their work in Napolitano’s (2015) notion of anthropological *trace*, defined as ‘the materials of knots of histories at the margins, as well as auratic presences’ (Napolitano 2015:47). According to this definition, narratives, human bodies and even dwellings which ‘elude archives of official history’ (Napolitano 2015:57) can be viewed as a trace. Whilst Bock & Stroud go beyond easily discernible material traces and interrogate the ‘internalised and embodied’ (Bock & Stroud 2019:4) experiences of place brought out in narratives, this study brings back the focus on lived spaces. It chooses to direct attention to the animation of ‘a space between the flesh and the environment through condensations and negations of histories’ (Napolitano 2015:60). Such an approach retains the possibility of treating absence in erased semiotic landscapes as an anthropological trace.¹

Methodologically, studying ghosts of Ukraine in the occupied Crimea means to work through ‘an endless layering of different assemblages with no fixed totality’ (Cresswell & Martin 2012). Such a focus on meaning-making processes that take place in a certain space and time echoes one of the key features of semiotic landscapes scholarship that foregrounds a sociolinguistics of spatial mobility (Stroud & Mpendukana 2009). Indeed, the methodology Stroud & Mpendukana (2009) term *material ethnography* is further expanded here to encompass ghosts and haunting. What I am calling a *ghost ethnography* is a study of situated meanings jointly produced and mutually constitutive, as they are made sense of and become (dis)entangled upon the researcher’s interrogation of absented semiotic landscapes. Such a methodology treats the researcher as one of salient actants in

the meaning- and sense-making process, but also as an agent of theory-making (cf. Barad & Gandorfer 2021:16).

Researcher's self as a constituent of relational ontologies

Like the haunting effects of Ukrainian music in the Georgian restaurant presented in the introduction, I have recorded a considerable number of instances of a 're-appearance' of the past in the present. The phenomenology of my moving body traversing spaces and making sense of fieldwork experiences, of people and objects, facilitated an evolving meaning-making process. The Crimean towns and cities I visited were not completely unknown to me, though I was visiting them for the first time. Different sorts of familiarities guided me through my Crimean experience, as the extract below shows.

(2) Entry in my fieldwork diary, September 9, 2019

Walking through the rows of vendors in the marketplace, it felt so good at one point. It felt as if I was in a familiar place, since I recollected 'our' Dniprovsky or Central Market, with the same products, smells, and similar faces. Herbs, fresh fruits and vegetables, some small roots or berries, which grandmothers carefully stacked, move on the crate—all this merges into one familiar atmosphere of the market. [As I was] walking through the underpass—just as in other Ukrainian cities, Kyiv especially comes to mind—[one was] selling all sorts of electronics, school notebooks and cheap clothes.

During my fieldwork, the spaces I walked through, the people I met, the institutional spaces I crossed, felt familiar. As extract (2) demonstrates, the experiences of the street market, where the sellers would carefully display the tiny little products from their backyards, familiar smells and sounds would bring sudden experiences of warmth. My moving body was feeling and thinking all together (cf. Thrift 2004), trying to make sense of what was happening around me. The assemblages of voices, faces, products, sounds, and smells aroused long unattended dormant feelings of some sort of here-ness and some sense of belonging.

Akin to the familiar smells and sounds of the market, the fading Khrushchyovkas,² omnipresent Soviet street-names, air pollution, and economic scarcity spoke a shared, familiar language to me. I made my way through the streets, took images of landscapes safe in the knowledge that they are, in some ways, remarkable instantiations of social actions. I proceeded and navigated the simultaneously familiar and strange terrain, paying attention to, and interested to notice something outstanding (Figures 2–5). I searched for signs of transgression. I searched for things jumping out of the presumably normal, led by the instinct, my institutional bias, or, rather, a pressing desire to 'reveal', to 'uncover', what is there but has not yet been attended to.

At first, material traces, defined as 'any enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement' (Ingold 2016:44), guided me. My orientations towards

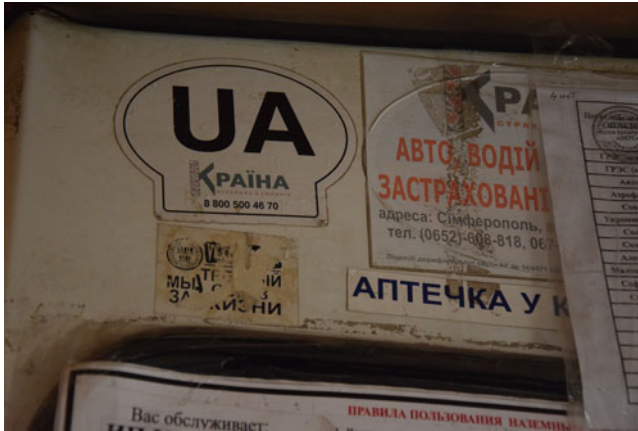


FIGURE 2. Layered stickers: ‘Insured in Ukraine’, Gvardejское.

certain traces, and not others, were due to the very specific research agenda I had to pursue. Whilst for many others, who lived in Crimea, life seemed to go on, for me, the history of Crimea was divided into ‘before’ and ‘after’ the annexation.

I was a very particular kind of non-distant observer. I felt acutely the injustices of this violation. Especially after having spent some time with my participants, I became alerted to the Russian insurrections on individuals’ freedoms and an increased sense of isolation that followed the imposition of international sanctions. Intimidations, imprisonment, and death threats faced by people who thought and



FIGURE 3. A tiny ad on the top of the stall written in Ukrainian: Ukrainian mobile operator MTS, Simferopol.



FIGURE 4. A sticker in Ukrainian: 'Kharkiv sausage factory', Simferopol.

spoke differently were among the symptoms of the Russian state' authoritarianism, which seemed to become a new norm in Crimea.

Walls were one of the central battlefields in the proclaimed war against Ukraine as an ideological competitor of the Russian state. Walls of buildings, bus stations, façades; walls in museums, cafes, shops; walls of schools, state-governed institutions, libraries: all of them served as canvases for this ideological fight.



FIGURE 5. A hard to remove sticker in Ukrainian: 'The object is under protection', with the Ukrainian flag as a background, Yevpatoria.

The materiality of built environments was not a mere façade that was inscribed upon, but rather the very ‘subject’ that acted upon me. The spectres of Ukraine spoke from these walls. Though the ghosts oftentimes resisted a representation and were hard to catch for someone disciplined to grasp the tangible, I sensed the ‘absenced’ (cf. Malinowski 2019:224) presences and attempted to capture the signs of ‘haunting [which were] taking place’ (Gordon 2008:8). My embodied experiences of Crimean spaces as well as my bodily engagement with (absent) materialities and (sometimes) present discursive replacements (e.g. in forms of newly installed signs) were central for the articulation of the absences that acquired an ability to speak. During my fieldwork engagement and during the writing of this study, I could produce a situated knowledge (cf. Haraway 1988), as shaped by my epistemic and political orientations, and mediate the hidden voices. In such instances, relational ontologies of histories, (im)materialities, and human subjectivities were apparent: the vibrant materialities AND absences generated haunting effects on my bodily sensibilities.

In the next section, I provide an analysis of the ethnographic data. I interrogate shadowy and holed absences as tangible evidence, question a ghost in an exhibition room, revisit the signs which managed to escape cleansing, and examine discursive omissions and material detachments in a museum and in an educational institution.

ANALYSIS: DISENTANGLING THE GHOSTS OF UKRAINE IN OCCUPIED CRIMEA

Approximating voids as data: Shadowy and holed absences as evidence of erasure

To interrogate shadowy and holed absences as empirical evidence, there is no other way but to sense and to recognize that there is ‘something’.

I took this photograph in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, as I was strolling around the town (Figure 6). It represents the entrance to the Simferopol’s Rayon Court (a red plate to the top left), the Chamber of Advocates of the Republic of Crimea (dark red plate to the bottom left), as well as the Crimean Association of attorneys (dark red plate to the right). All three organisations—the court, the chamber, and the association of attorneys—were registered anew after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. A brief online search shows that, before the annexation in March 2014, this building used to host ‘Simferopol’s Rayon Court of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea’—the official Ukrainian name reserved for the peninsula. Besides the plate names, the flag of the Russian Federation in the top left corner above the door and the three coloured stickers of Rosgvardia acknowledge the protection of this object by the Russian state.

At first, no tangible evidence of the past seems to be present here (Figure 6). A further enlarged Figure 6 shows the signs of erasure (Figure 7) in more detail. If one looks closely, one can identify the traces in the shadowed rectangular sign and in the

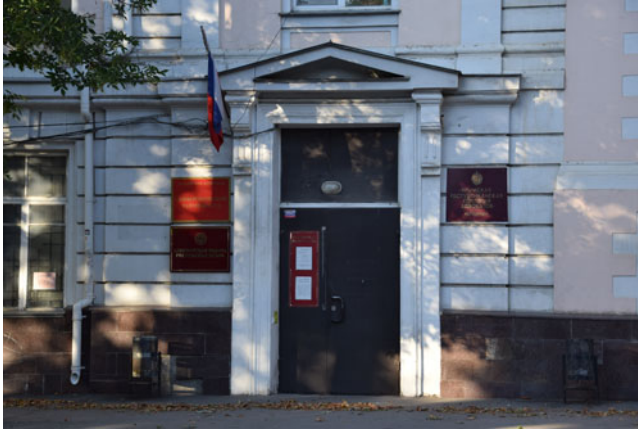


FIGURE 6. Simferopol's Rayon Court (top left), the Chamber of Advocates of the Republic of Crimea Simferopol (bottom left), the Crimean Association of attorneys (top right). Simferopol, September 2019.

four tiny holes left from the previously installed sign-plate (Figure 7). This evidence makes one wonder about 'what' has been erased, 'who' has erased it, as well as 'why' this erasure has taken place. Perhaps the newly installed signs to the right, as adorned with credentials of the Russian Federation, may hold the clue to this semiotics of produced absence (cf. Karlander 2019).

The next photograph (Figure 8) was made during my trip to Sevastopol. This town has a special status as the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea fleet. The photograph depicts the Management of the Magistrates Court of the city of Sevastopol (registered 06.03.2015).



FIGURE 7. Signs of erasure (enlarged Figure 6).



FIGURE 8. ‘The Management of the Magistrates Court of the city Sevastopol’, Sevastopol, September 2019.

In comparison to Figure 6, more visible and blatant traces of acts of erasure are evident here. The previously installed plates were ripped right out of the wall, leaving behind still visible anchors (wall plugs) and deep holes. Like Figure 6, in this photo the new and only recently installed sign-plate resonates with the traces of violence. Likewise, one can see the production of absence through erasure, that is, there are no attempts to hide these traces behind the layer of plaster or by producing a bigger sign-plate.

The work one can observe here is described by Gordon (2008:75) as a creation of ‘shadowy knowledge’. There is an active ‘suppression and elimination of the proof’ of social existence (cf. Gordon 2008:78–79). The formerly recognized and publicly

available knowledge is forced into disappearance—the process that does not go unnoticed but leaves traces of the violence of its removal. Shadowy knowledge is consistent with Napolitano’s (2015) description of an ethnographic trace as ‘the materials of knots of histories at the margins’ (2015:47). This knowledge has slithered into the marginality, of which nothing but holes and shades remain. This knowledge is touched by the hand of someone who enacts an erasure; it is, since erased, clearly expendable, undesirable, and deemed to be lost in silence.

A ghost in the room: Interdiscursivity and agentic matter

Cold-blooded erasures and instalments of new sign-plates, since they were somewhat predictable, did not usually provoke an affective response in me. At other times though, a wave of anger would overwhelm me, and I would sense goose-bumps all over my skin. I recall one such instance of attending an exhibition at the Central Museum of Taurida.

The exhibition about ‘the accession’ and ‘the Russian spring’ (Figures 9 and 10) followed by the Crimean occupation intended to bring to light the development of events preceding the so called ‘Crimean referendum’ in March 2014. It aimed to demonstrate remarkable changes taking place in Crimea, especially in terms of economic investments as well as infrastructure and security developments. The exhibition sought to educate the public by creating an appeal through emotionally charged figures, utilising images of children who are holding the Russian flag in celebration. The photographs of old fragile people—like the pensioner sitting in a wheelchair who, although apparently 100 years old, still managed to cast his vote in support of ‘Russian’ Crimea at the referendum (Figure 10)—attempt to convey a message of widespread popular support.



FIGURE 9. The corridor-space of the exhibition ‘5 years in the native harbour’ at the Central Museum of Taurida, Simferopol.



FIGURE 10. The evidence of ‘how it all was’. Central Museum of Taurida, Simferopol.

For me, the corridor space of this fabricated exhibition felt abhorrent. Against this backdrop, the absence of Ukraine was even more acutely present. When attending the museum exhibition, I was struck by the degree of ‘naturalness’ with which the Ukrainian present has been silenced. I felt the complicity of these walls in serving another function, in serving as a canvas for other stories. They did not just carry the new images, the new inscriptions, but almost provoked a panic attack.

The presence spoke of absence as the ‘said’ of the ‘non-said’ (Foucault 1969:28). Such an orchestration of a very specific Russianized Crimean

history, which felt as an assemblage of falsified facts, was shocking to me. The presence of this evidence amidst the absence of any Ukrainian voice only intensified the acute sense of the violence that had been committed. Importantly, this absence was not in and of itself, but only perceived as such through the process of mediation by the reader, in the context of what WAS said, in terms of WHAT WAS GOING ON discursively and materially on the ground. The exhibition was a nodal point of many other material-discursive configurations. It figured among other formations, which preceded or followed it (cf. Foucault 1969:25–26). Given this interdiscursivity, the presence of this reified account of the Crimean occupation spoke of absence, of what was not said: ‘The manifest discourse, is no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this “not-said” is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said’ (Foucault 1969:28). The presence of this absence manifested the effects of silencing another knowledge (cf. Kulick 2005; Kerfoot 2020).

Moreover, this absence, sensed as a ghost, had its own language. Besides me, the ABSENCE was another speaker. It spoke about repression, erasure, and purposeful forgetting. It spoke about attempts to make Ukraine, the difference, dead. Absence could tell many stories. Viewing absence as an ethnographic trace, imbued with agentive qualities, allowed the ghost to speak. It allowed the emptied and then re-filled space to speak out of the absence, to speak of absence, and to fill the room with the un-dead of the Ukrainian spectre. The absence of Ukraine was a trace that entangled together other histories. Such a sensed absence discharged haunting effects. Absence, pierced through the language of violence, haunted and was itself an ethnographic trace. The absence of any Ukrainian discursive and material signification was a ghost in the room.

Signs forgotten to be erased

In Gvardejskoe, a settlement close to Simferopol, I encountered a manifold number of material traces pointing towards the presence of the Ukrainian state; they were not (yet) or, in oversight, forgotten to be, erased. One such instance was another wall. At the edge of the settlement, having reached the end of the central, newly built road, I faced a deserted railway station (Figure 11). Since the annexation, the railway connection between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine was stopped and the occasional trains departing and arriving mostly moved in-between Crimean towns and cities.

I found a mark of a Ukrainian state-owned company responsible for rail transport in Ukraine УЗ ‘UZ’, *Українські Залізниці* ‘Ukrainian Railways’ (Figure 12). Disentangling the knot of this unremarkable sign, one discovers that, since March 2014, numerous enterprises and Ukrainian state-owned organisations on the peninsula have been ‘nationalised’ or, in other words, ‘stolen’ by the Russian Federation.³ This involved the seizure of not only former Ukrainian state property,



FIGURE 11. A wall. Gvardejskoe.

including the Ukrainian railway, but also the confiscation of private assets. Unlike in the previous examples, where the presence spoke of absence as the ‘said’ of the ‘non-said’ (Figures 9 and 10), here, the barely visible linguistic sign served as an entry point for the investigation of absences and presences in semiotic landscapes.

One can only speculate as to why this had NOT been erased: was it maybe because the sign was in stone, or that it was situated in a peripheral or unattended space, barely noticeable by less attentive observers? Or was it simply forgotten? When treated as an ethnographic trace, this sign unequivocally points towards the presence of historically delineated pasts of the Ukrainian statehood in Crimea. That is, the



FIGURE 12. V3 ‘UZ’, Ukrainian Railways (enlarged Figure 11).

sign indexes the availability of Ukrainian infrastructure buildings and marked fences or walls, which, as of now in ‘Russian’ Crimea, have no legal standing. Viewed as an ethnographic trace, this Ukrainian Railway sign, etched in stone, gave the first hint of, and the possibility to disentangle the relationships between ‘space, violence, materiality and marginality’ (Napolitano 2015:62).

Compared to other examples, this wall did not provide evidence of acts of erasure. On the contrary, it was an instance of non-erasure of the Ukrainian statehood, which lurked into the present through its very vivid but somewhat hard-to-see visibility. Rather than simply being and functioning as a wall, it was indeed a *ruin* (Stoler 2021). This ruin was inhabited by the ghosts of the bygone past. It was another exhibit testifying to the violence of regime. This barely visible sign was a left-over, a ‘skeleton’ that remained from the assault and abandonment brought about by the Russian ruination. Akin to the museum exhibition, it was another testimony of violence, shouting out loud the very fabric and scale of enforced destruction permeating all public sites, even the fine-grained fabric of unattended landscapes.

Decaying signs

While some signs have been erased, other signs were left to decay.

Figure 13 depicts the remains of a closed and obliterated currency exchange kiosk previously run by the Ukrainian bank, PrivatBank. Like other Ukrainian assets, here, the PrivatBank property was appropriated (or, as it is put in Russian, ‘nationalised’) by the Russian government and transferred to Russian banks, including the RNKB bank. Bright advertisements and other promotional materials



FIGURE 13. ‘Nationalisation’ of Ukrainian property. Yevpatoria, September 2019.

placed on the currency exchange kiosk advertise cheap calls to Russia, promise help with mortgages, and offer hair for sale. Amidst the abandonment of these postings, one can distinguish the remains of another ruin: an empty steel frame possibly pointing to the name of the currency exchange kiosk with the empty spaces reserved for ads beneath the window, and, to the right of the window, the remains of the PrivatBank exchange rates—with voids instead of currency calculations. It states in Ukrainian, ‘Currency exchange’, to ‘buy’ and to ‘sell’, followed by the three most important and demanded currencies, the American dollar, the Euro, and the Russian rouble. We do not see the name of the bank because it was carefully erased, but the green brand colour and other traces of erasure, such as attempted voids, indicate the former presence of the one of the largest Ukrainian banks that operated in Crimea.

The Ukrainian language, the brand colours, the purposeful omissions, and the attempted production of nothingness, intertwined with the modality of pastness, betray previously conducted asset forfeitures. The unimportance of what remains ‘is haunted by meaning and culture’ and is on the way ‘to become a part of nature again’ (Derrida 2012:4), as we can see from unruly and disorderly climbing plants gradually covering the wall. The traces of what has been here previously reveal the attempts of purposeful erasure of the presence which was not supposed to belong.

Discursive omissions and material detachments

When, and if granted a place, a ‘Ukrainian’ story is selectively narrated in very specific, controlled contexts, such as in a museum or in an educational institution. In these instances, Ukraine is put on display, with its place and the ‘terms of [its] address’ (Butler 1997:2) clearly defined by the Russian state-sponsored museum.

The photograph in Figure 14 was shot in the Ethnographic Museum of Simferopol in September 2019. Together with other artefacts, this example is supposed to illustrate the ways ‘Ukrainians’ used to live. Ukrainians, as we can read from the plate on the right, used to inhabit the territories around the Black Sea from the ninth century (that is, extending to the times of Kyivan Rus) to the year 2014 (that is, to the period when the last census was conducted in Crimea and counted ‘344,515 Ukrainians’). Here, Ukrainians are taken as an ethnic group which had some connection with the Crimean territory (see Figure 15). In this chronicle, going back 1,000 years, there is no mention of recent political events, that is, the unsettling and competing narratives of statehood.

In other examples in the museum, a purposeful historical distance in the ways Ukrainians are discursively represented is clearly seen. ‘The Ukrainians’ are constructed as a group, that can be ‘counted’, that has its own traditions, engaged in ‘ploughing of the land, breeding of animals, extraction of salt, cart, log, hand-craft etc.’ (Figure 15). Aside from these dated representations, there is literally no space left, or granted, for the recent history. By erasing the civic discourse, the museum



FIGURE 14. Museumized Ukrainian practices. A photo from the Ethnographic Museum, Simferopol. September 2019.

manages to avoid uncomfortable topics and omit the thematization of the contested status of Crimea. Such essentialized images of who ‘the Ukrainians’ are supposed to be creates a seemingly homogenous group, which is easier to be made into ‘The Other’.

Similar dynamics can be seen in another example of museumized Ukraine. When talking to participants during my fieldwork, a Ukrainian classroom was said to be a case in point. This is a classroom full of ‘items of Ukrainian life’ (in Ukrainian): Ukrainian embroidered blouses, a wooden horseshoe for luck, ornamented earthenware jugs, wooden cups, pots, spoons, cutting boards, wooden maces, embroidered towels (*rushnyks*), needlework, woven baskets decorated with the colours of the Ukrainian national flag, ribbons and head-wreaths, ceramic figurines of the Cossacks. At the top, there are photographs and a map of Ukraine—its name only showing its two last letters *на*, derived from *Україна/Україна* ‘Ukraine’.

Across these three images (Figures 14, 15, and 16), very specific representations of historically distant Ukraine are selected and portrayed: timeless images of what Ukraine ‘should’ mean (cf. Witcomb 2013; Kosatica 2019 for other contexts of trauma). Such displays are not meant for interaction. Rather, if and when granted a place, Ukraine serves as the background of a classroom or as a handcrafted theatrical scene, resting in the pastness of time and belonging to folklore and tradition. Both in the museum and in the classroom, the discursive-material construction of what Ukraine is supposed to be is controlled, and its representation protected by the veil of museumized artefacts. One may not touch or live what is Ukrainian. One may come, and look, and then go. Indeed, such a treatment of what can possibly pass as Ukrainian is a way of exoticizing the ‘Other’.

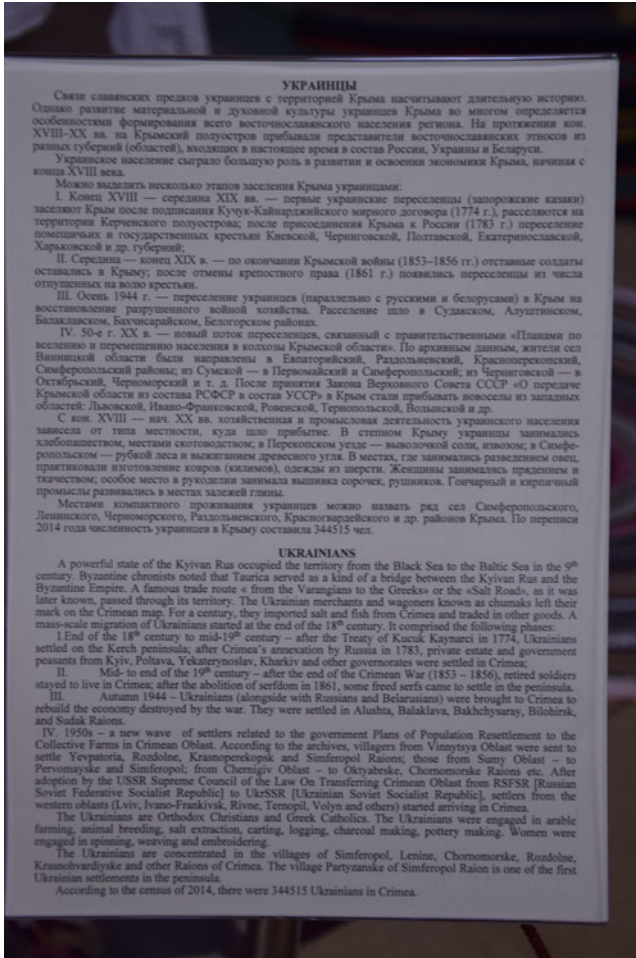


FIGURE 15. An information plaque accompanying the exhibition about ‘Ukrainians’. A photograph from the Ethnographic Museum, Simferopol. September 2019.

DISCUSSION

This article has analysed five instances of vibrant voids in Crimea. It has discussed shadowy and holed absences as tangible evidence of silencing, questioned a ghost in an exhibition room, revisited the signs which managed to escape cleansing, attended to the signs which fell victim to exploitation and further decay, and interrogated discursive omissions and material detachments in a museum and a classroom space. The analysis of semiotic landscapes is revealing of the uneasy pasts of systemic violence, manifested through the erasure of the presence of



FIGURE 16. 'A Ukrainian classroom'. Simferopol, September 2019.

Ukrainian statehood on the peninsula, unless that statehood is considered to be unimportant. The analysis has shown that the past always remains present, visible, and audible: erasure does not simply negate Ukraine, and voids or shadows are not merely a matter of aesthetics. Rather, erasure leaves traces. Voids point at processes of silencing. Absences speak of violent acts.

This article has as its goal the revisiting and reclaiming of the Ukrainian landscape in Crimea. Bringing to light these 'absences' names the attempted erasures and grants an existence to them; it animates other worlds that were meant to disappear. Signs of absence in the semiotic landscape, contrasted with presences 'hidden inside', beneath, or behind it, reveal an unacknowledged absence of previously silenced or invisibilized life-worlds (cf. Kerfoot & Hyltenstam 2017). Physically erasing any signs that represent Ukraine in Crimea, Russia continues to deny the Ukrainian citizens and speakers their histories, and their ability to constitute and to belong to this space. Russia takes away their right to be and to socially exist.

'I' mattered for/in this research. As I grew up in Ukraine, spoke various languages present there (Russian and Ukrainian), I acquired a certain 'feel of space' as an 'effect of inhabitance' (Ahmed 2013:7). I was prone to see in certain ways and was orientated towards certain places. My subjectivity and my bodily situatedness remained central for this unfolding dialogue revolving around the questions being asked and responses provided. Being oriented towards material traces of Ukraine eventually allowed me to sense ghostly presences in the occupied Crimea, and to express them in certain ways. To come closer to ghosts, I had to be led by my previously acquired 'implicit knowledge ... that was exercised by orientations toward objects' (Ahmed 2013:124). I knew I had better 'check' less visible and

unapproachable places for traces that were not yet erased, as for instance, on the edges of kiosks, on the grey backgrounds of walls and streets, in the enclosed and confined spaces of buses. When walking in the central squares, I was alerted to details that were hardly distinguishable from the background, such as memorial plates or almost invisible signs of erasure, embroidering newly installed sign-plates. Attention to margins—be they margins in space, in barely present languages, in Ukrainian national colours—would sensitise my gaze towards the material traces of the past leaking into the present.

During this project, it has been important for me to shed light on the injustices that the Russian Federation has committed and continues to commit against Ukraine, its territories, and its inhabitants. In Crimea, one could sense the ghosts of Ukraine, sometimes in spite of the absence of any material signs. The traces ‘exerted a hard-to-articulate, non-discursive, yet positive pressure on the body, thereby turning such absence into a physical presence’ (Gordillo 2021:31–32), and encounters with ghosts turned ‘form[s], object[s] or place[s]’ (Napolitano 2015:60) into MATTER. It has been shown that the researcher’s subjectivities, my subjectivities, were affected by the (im)material environments and built a part of the relational ontology of semiotic landscapes, such that my experiences, histories, and sensory body (in)capacities were central in grasping certain ghosts (but not others).

In speaking of language materiality, Cavanaugh & Shankar invite us to ‘rethink presences and forms of language’ and ‘the concomitant ethnographic contingencies’ (2017:1), and to grant language ‘its own’ materiality (2017:4). The examples discussed above show that materialities can speak even as they haunt. As shown above, (im)material environments matter, like human bodies (Kitis & Milani 2015; Kosatica 2021) and objects do (Ringrose & Rawlings 2015; Caronia & Mortari 2015). In other words, it seems that we should not only be concerned with the materiality of language or language materiality, but with materiality—or its absence—as ANOTHER KIND OF LANGUAGE. Akin to the studies of silence and absent language in applied linguistics (cf. Coupland & Coupland 1997; Busch 2016; Thurlow 2016:487; Busch & McNamara 2020), what should come into focus in semiotic landscapes research is absence. As shown above, ruins, voids, blank walls, and material-discursive omissions may provoke meaningful forms of engagement, create persisting encounters, and even articulate silenced and invisibilized knowledges.

Absences are not only by-products of specific social and political regimes that set as their goal the invisibilization of what is considered ‘Other’. That is, absences are of interest, not as mere products of acts of destruction (cf. Björkvall & Archer 2022). Rather, absences have a capacity to speak or even shout. ‘Condensed historicity of signs [as] indexing multiple pasts, simultaneous presents and possible futures’ (Borba 2018:164) is also true for absence: the very holes and shadows that remain after the annexation of Crimea reveal the presence of other haunting life-worlds which the new state has attempted to destroy. Upon interrogation, they may tell their own stories that resist forgetting. Vibrant voids may re-orient

our gaze toward silenced otherworldliness and bring to the surface other languages, histories, ways of speaking, acting, and being.

Ghosts may be unsettling. They may reappear in the present, cause disturbances, evoke bewilderment, or take one by surprise ('Ukrainian music, why is it here?'). Ghostly inquiries require one to disentangle the 'knots of histories' (Napolitano 2015:47) and subjectivities. Since 'knowing and accounting for the meaning of a semiotic landscape becomes a problem of hearing, disentangling, and re-entangling the many "voices" that may have gone into creating the landscape' (Bock & Stroud 2019:24), it becomes a question of LISTENING to ghosts and finding appropriate means to name them.

CONCLUSIONS

Traces of Ukraine? In fact, in everyone's soul, in hearts, we all are for returning to Ukraine This is probably just what remains in the heart, inside. Well, yes, you go to the side of the steppe regions, and you see these fields are yellow and the sky is blue, and you immediately remember the same Kherson, when you go from Crimea to Kherson, the same fields, the same view, and you perfectly understand that we are not far away from each other.

Ferize (translated from Russian)

The sensed absence of Ukrainian statehood and the unreachability of Ukraine, despite the physical proximity of its territory, animates ghosts. We see that Ferize is haunted by Ukraine when retreating to it in her imagination.

Given Russia's efforts to erase Ukraine in Crimea, what we encounter today is its spectre. This Ukrainian ghost is haunted by the Russian hand, but it is also haunting in the way it orients towards the future in its (re)materializations (cf. Macherey 1999:19–20). As I have tried to demonstrate, attempts to dematerialize Ukrainian presence do not erase it. Rather, what is left behind are the ghosts of Ukraine, touched by and transformed into traces of violence visible in holes, shades and shadows, encountered in exhibitions, haunted by meanings of non-importance, found in decaying semiotic landscapes (re)turning to nature, and, finally, leaking from other worlds and made into museumized artefacts. By focusing on what is silenced and what has meant to be erased, one calls 'the presumably dead into life, into contemporaneity' (Gordon 2008:115). This should be done, as Derrida (2012) reminds us, not 'to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right to a hospitable memory, out of a concern for justice' (2012:58).

NOTES

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¹While traditionally, in studies of multimodality, a semiotic resource highlights the affordances and limitations of its representational modes (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:8), here, absence of any representation is recognized as empirical evidence, whereby a ghost—a sign of absence—may be made to matter (Napolitano 2015:60). The analytical notion of trace allows us to glue individuals' subjectivities and multiple histories together. Hence, a sign effectuated by erasure becomes a trace when it affects the individual interrogating the sign. A ghost—as a sign of haunting that is taking place (Gordon 2008:8)—suggests that historical, subjective, and affective aspects of certain signs may become a trace. Hence, the traces discussed in this study—the absences and their material effects, such as voids, holes, shadows—refer to the very particular indexes (in a Peircean conceptualization), which are produced sequentially because of enforced erasure of the Ukrainian statehood.

²Concrete-paneled apartment buildings built during Nikita Khrushch'yov's era.

³cf. Amendments to the Decree of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea of March 17, 2014 No. 1757-6/1 'On the nationalization of enterprises and property of naval transport, the Department of the Ministry of Infrastructure of Ukraine and the Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine, located in the territory of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol'.

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