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**Manoeuvres of dissent in
dispossession**

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Abstract

Protest has become a hot topic in recent sociolinguistic and semiotic landscapes scholarship. Despite a growing number of studies, little research has been done on dissent as it is jointly orchestrated by individuals and objects. To fill this gap, this paper builds on previous semiotic landscapes studies (Bock & Stroud, 2019) and offers an analysis of political action as it is produced in the ‘nooks and crannies’ of everyday life (Besnier, 2009; Scott, 1990). Interrogating participants’ memories of dispossession, the paper brings to the fore their experiences of the *manoeuvring* required to enact dissent. The performative acts that they describe involve situated context-sensitive intentional decisions to protest, both in and out of the public eye. The acts of manoeuvring require thought-through calculation, ongoing readjustment, and reinvention on the part of the protesters as they respond to the calls of their immediate material environment. As interviews and photographic data collected in Crimea illuminate, individuals find recourse to things, but things affect individual actors too, hence suggesting that language and other semiotic markers of belonging come to be experienced as a complex multimodal phenomenon in the everyday manoeuvres of protest.

Keywords: manoeuvring; protest; semiotic landscapes; denial; materiality; Crimea

1. Introduction

I am sad, Motherland, I am chilly.
With silence wrapped around my shoulders,
I breathe, I write, I live furtively.
No fires are lit. The candles flicker
Only in the darkness of my misfortune
So little light for freedom.

Lilya Budzhurova ‘Poetry of Exile’¹

‘There is so little light for freedom,’ writes Lilya Budzhurova, a renown Crimean Tatar poet, in the silence which surrounds her motherland, Crimea. She lives and writes, but like many, she hardly sets fires. In the aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea there were many who undertook small acts of protest without a wisp of smoke. Recollecting the events of the territorial dispossession surrounding Crimea, the participants in this study, Ali and Kim, bring their memories of protest to the surface. No fires were set in these events either. Confronted with loss and finding themselves in situations defined by constraints, the participants contested the imposed restrictions with the ‘little light’ they had. Moving across a

¹Мне грустно, Родина, мне зябко. / Молчанием укутав плечи, / Дышу, пишу, живу украдкой. / Костров не жгу. Мерцают свечи / Лишь в полутьме моей невзгоды... / Так мало света для свободы. Лилия Буджурова «Поэзия Изгнания»

turbulent (Stroud, 2015b, 2015a) space in which their ways of being and speaking were made other (cf. Blommaert, 2016), participants had to *manoeuvre* in order to make themselves fit, and, at the same time, to retain their sense of self.

This paper offers an analysis of their political action as it was produced in the ‘nooks and crannies’ of everyday life (Besnier, 2009; Scott, 1990). To accomplish this, it draws on the data collected over two months of ethnographic fieldwork, in which participants shared their memories of protest as experienced in the semiotic landscapes of the past. Alongside photographs from their personal archive, semi-structured interviews with two Crimean residents, Kim and Ali, conducted in Russian and translated into English, were used as the ethnographic data for the investigation of their manoeuvring. The performative and highly symbolic acts examined pertain to situated context-sensitive intentional decisions to protest, both in and out of the public eye. I call these ‘manoeuvring acts’ since they require thought-through calculation, ongoing readjustment and reinvention as the protesters responded to the calls of the immediate material environment. This kind of dissent encompasses ‘a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak their own name’ (Scott, 1990: 19). ‘Manoeuvring’ entails a deliberate play on the ambiguity of conventionalized meanings and a purposeful disguise of dissent.

Contrary to de Certeau's (1984) ‘tactics’, reserved for city dwellers who navigate the ‘strategically’ designed space constructed from above, this focus on manoeuvring allows us to further unpack and analyse the complexity of agency/social action as jointly achieved in the interaction of humans and non-humans.² Not only do individuals respond to and navigate around the material world themselves, but they also speak through or become exposed to things. This paper hence contributes to the conversation on how a post-humanist perspective on places and things that constrain – but also *enable* – human agency to protest can inform our understanding of a ‘force-field of possible meanings and readings’ of signs (Bock and Stroud 2019: 14).

Situating this study across the fields of semiotic landscapes studies, and following the new materialist and phenomenological traditions, I approach the data with close attention to the subjects speaking of objects as affecting interactional outcomes. With its setting as the internationally contested Crimean territory, which has undergone multiple historical transitions over the past decades, this paper’s goal is to foreground the individuals’ recapitulations of past experiences of manoeuvring needed to express their claims to national belonging. Listening to the individual stories of affectively charged experiences of the past in relation to the unfolding events of dispossession (Butler and Athanasiou’s 2013: xi) allowed me to identify and carefully analyse the acts of protest in which the objects were involved.

In the following sections, I outline recent research on the semiosis of protest (§2), followed by a data analysis (§3). In the final section (§4), I discuss how these analysed acts of manoeuvring can form an addition to existing scholarship interested in the inter-relationship of people, places and semiosis in the jointly orchestrated attempts to live dissent under conditions of turbulence and constraint.

² Due to space constraints, I am not going to delve into further criticism of de Certeau's (1984) work. Suffice to say, however, that his accounts of the processes of space construction (strategy vs. tactics) and the individuals involved in those processes (‘homogeneous’ people vs. authorities) have been problematized in a range of studies (see, for instance, Collie, 2013; Morris, 2004; Pile, 1997).

2. Protest semiosis

Protest has been a hot topic in recent social semiotic scholarship, which acknowledges the worldwide relevance and urgency of understanding the politics of transgression (Lou & Jaworski, 2016; Martín Rojo, 2014a, 2014b; Seals, 2017; Waksman & Shohamy, 2016). The potential of semiosis to disrupt the power of state authorities (Raish, 2019), to problematize the production of inequalities, invisibilities, and exclusion, and to promote social justice has been interrogated in a number of recent studies (Moriarty, 2019; Sebastian, 2019; Taylor-Leech, 2020). Transient linguistic landscapes accommodating inscribed violence (Bilkic, 2018), but also harbouring and shaping collective identities of violent protests (Kitis & Milani, 2015), have been discussed as arenas of contestation, exclusion, and dissent (Rubdy & Ben Said, 2015). All of these studies illuminate the intricate ways in which individuals attempting to reinforce social change work synergistically with the material world. The contested positionalities of speakers, as experienced and expressed semiotically (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010), have been discussed in relation to the construction of spatial, discursive, and imaginary divisions between Self and Other.

Besides the preoccupation with language-related matters and the drive to tease out the potential of semiosis in promoting social change, all these studies have had a significant impact on the ways we approach resistance as well as potentially political spaces. As has been demonstrated in these numerous studies, different public and common spaces have been considered as potentially political. In particular, central squares and areas representing the nodes of a city (Goutsos & Polymeneas, 2014; Martín Rojo, 2014b) have been examined as foci of transgressive events contributing to our understanding of the dynamics of protest. Increasingly, semiotic practices of opposition have been studied as they intermingle with physical and digital sites (Chun, 2014; García Agustín & Aguirre Díaz, 2014; Vuorsola, 2020). Mediating and carrying out transgressive work, in previous studies on spaces of protest, bodies have been taken as another site of investigation: they have been shown to ‘speak politically’ (Butler, 2011) and act ‘louder than any words’ (see Kitis & Milani, 2015: 271, 286 on further discussion). Moreover, it has been persuasively demonstrated that bodies, alongside other speechless things, nonetheless speak without words. As Peck and Stroud (2015: 149) insist, bodies and selves as scripted by social meanings ‘engage with [...] and are being *engaged by* landscapes’. Bodies tell stories. They provoke and incite. But so do other things: they produce meaning and act without words (cf. Peña-Alves, 2020: 393), leaving imprints on individuals’ bodies, forcing them to adjust.

Despite a growing number of studies on protest, little research has been done on acts of protest that are jointly orchestrated by individuals and objects. To unpack the interaction of human and non-human subjects in manoeuvring for dissent, I have adopted a twofold approach. First, I analyse the agency of things in discursive practices by taking account of individual recapitulations of the past as it is experienced and remembered. To do so, I interrogate individual memories through haunting landscapes of imagination. As Stroud and Bock (2018) point out, places are constituted through the traces of memory akin to condensed stories. Investigating the examples of apartheid landscapes and intergenerational subjectivities, they point out that ‘place is imagined out of the circulation of memories [...] and fragments of experience’ (Bock & Stroud, 2018: 5). In this paper, participants’ memories of protest, their experiences of dispossession and the subsequent responses, bring to the fore different spatial and temporal realms that are manifested in contested memories. Haunted landscapes allow us to grasp actors, feelings, and memories lying beyond the here and now and conjure up the contested pasts (Pardue, 2018). Secondly, to interrogate the ways things

speak to participants and are recognized as salient actants when expressing dissent – the ways things animate resistance and act as political agents (cf. *ibid.*) – I develop an analysis from the perspective of things, both as entextualized in interviews, but also as displayed in the participant’s photographs of resistant semiosis. Building on a semiotic landscapes scholarship that deploys the ‘thingly’ perspective (Bennett, 2013) and questions the ways ‘humans are authored by the places [they] inhabit’ (Bock & Stroud, 2019: 18; Peck & Stroud, 2015), I trace how mundane things affect individuals’ lives and their future trajectories, but also how they enable protest.

3. Data analysis

3.1. Becoming a political subject with objects

When Kim and I discussed the semiotic landscapes of Crimea, ‘symbolics’ came up immediately. Talking about the different languages used across the territory – Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean Tatar – Kim revealed a dynamic relationship between spatial and temporal restraints to express certain claims of belonging. From Kim’s perspective, the power shift happening in post-Soviet Crimea has significantly impacted the use of language in public spaces. Just as particular languages came to represent certain ways of speaking, corresponding ways of being came to be altered too. When individuals became dispossessed of ways to express their sense of self openly, they happened to find a solution in things, in ‘symbolics’. Not only was the speaking of a certain language used to mark someone as a member of a particular opposing camp, but also were national imagery and certain ways of being and behaving. As Kim explained,

But, I think, it all escalated, again, it all escalated [...], because the symbolics started. Symbolics in cars. It was especially, if you were here [*back in time*], you would have seen [*that*] that time was a Cold War of flags. Because the symbolics was enormous, and there was a lot of it, both Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar and Russian; it was absolutely everywhere. I don’t know, even cars, pens, badges, key chains, hair, backpacks, I mean, well, it was all there and was very aggravated. It was such an incredibly tense situation, because [...] it seemed like something was about to go off... I don’t know [*Laughs*] wall-to-wall, because it was really tough.

The essentialized competing camps opposed each other ‘wall-to-wall’ with symbolics and languages demarcating the hard borders of competing parties. In this discussion, symbolics was involved in the ‘aggravation’ of the situation and the semiosis was metapragmatically addressed as an important tool – even a weapon – in the ‘Cold War of flags’. It would seem that what Kim calls ‘symbolics’ is a collective noun bringing together anything which can be traced back to Ukrainian, Russian, or Crimean Tatar languages, actors and/or practices through the foundational notions of indexicality and as performatively taking place (cf. Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003) in a contested territory.



Figure 1. Photographs of ‘symbolics’ from Kim’s private archive, from left to right: 1. A woven bracelet, 2. A heart composed of chocolate M&M candies, 3. Party balloons. (Reproduced with the permission of the owner.)

Some examples of this sort of ‘symbolics’ can be seen above in Figure 1, as taken from Kim’s private archive. A woven bracelet, a heart composed of M&M candies, or even alternate blue and yellow party balloons figure as iterations in Kim’s protest arsenal. These particular shades of blue and yellow could index different things for different audiences. Situated in post-Soviet Crimea, these colours are used to point towards Ukrainian or Crimean Tatar imagery of national flags (figure 2). Though differing in the shade of blue, the blue and yellow of both Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian national imageries was translated into these emblematic blue and yellow colours, encoding pro-Ukrainian political positions.

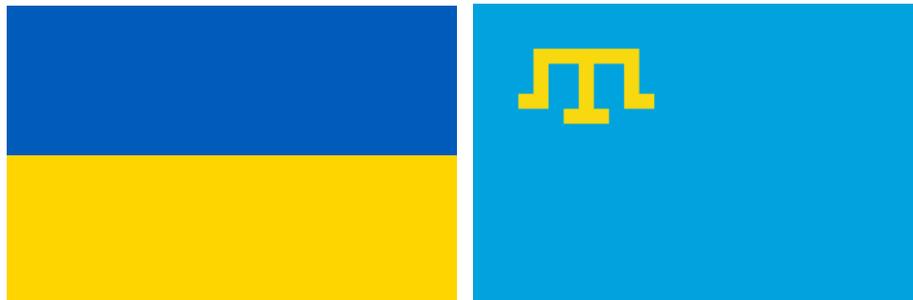


Figure 2. The state flag of Ukraine (left) and the flag of the Crimean Tatar nation. From Wikimedia Commons.

These flags performed national identities by taking into account the historical linkages between certain communities of citizens and the material artefacts that came to embody them (cf. Milani & Levon, 2017: 529-530). In the context of opposing claims for territory, the displaying of a Ukrainian flag in a territory that was claimed to be non-Ukrainian by a competing party manifested a performative act of resistance. Carrying out an act of citizenship through use of the flag reasserted the territory’s identity as Ukrainian and reinforced the view of resisting subjects as such who actively engaged in acts of citizenship (cf. Lim, Stroud, & Wee, 2018).

The affordances of these protesting objects also merit attention. To enable their use as items that might express ‘undesirable’ claims of belonging, multiple decisions were made by the producer or user of these objects. Their size, their placement (on the body or close to the body), their hidable, eatable or ‘poppable’ nature, their functionality as ‘mere’ accessory, sweets, or celebratory balloons, underlined a preplanned strategy of *trivialization and/or*

destruction of protesting objects, should the carrier be threatened or jeopardized. It also appealed to the openness of multiple readings of the blue and yellow colours on the part of the intended audience.

3.2. People exposed to things

Things are not only actively relied on as ideological weapons in turbulent times, but they are also said to have agency of their own. This means things have the potential to endanger an individual who comes into close contact with them. Recollecting the past, Kim remembered how she and her friends needed to stay alert when coming into contact with symbolics. She recalls how she was instructed by her family not to display them on her body since there was ‘no need to draw attention to herself’. While the semiosis indexing a particular national alliance could facilitate the recognition and classification of someone as a supporter of a certain camp, the very same signalling could expose its carrier to the malevolence of the rival party. As Kim puts it:

At that point in time, it made you a walking target, because when you see a person and you see [*their*] symbolics, something clicks – and this is why there was such a tense situation really. I was not allowed to wear [*it*], but I didn’t care and continued to wear [*it*], because even the *** [*institution*] had such an atmosphere. Because you wanted to support the country in which you were born and in which you had a good life.

In this extract, individual agency comes forward together with the agency of disruptive semiosis. At that time, to see a person wearing the symbolics from the opposing camp would provoke an immediate response, ‘a click’. The symbolics would expose the carrier to external threats in an unsafe environment, transforming the individual into a ‘walking target’. But the everyday fears of loss, the loss of ‘the country in which you were born and in which you had a good life’, justified the risks undertaken. Kim and her friends understand the complexity of the situation, but it did not curb their ‘reckless’ behaviour. Despite warnings, they decided to continue the fight.

Things could enable and delimit, afford and prevent, but also, as seen from Kim’s words, render the subjects interacting with them vulnerable and unprotected (Lim, Stroud, Wee, 2018, also Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). Things shaped lives, delineated possible behaviours, and sketched possibilities for further action (Caronia & Mortari, 2015: 403). Objects could ‘move conversations (and subsequent action) symbolically forward’ (ibid.: 400). They were not mere tools, but ‘active participants in social life’ (ibid: 386) once they were awoken from their dormant state and made meaningful in an unfolding encounter. Being in close contact, both the semiosis and the people acquired the transgressive flavour. By extension, the people and things could become ‘infected’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 290), even if only temporarily, by the indexicalities of transgression.

Ali told the story of a former teacher, Maria, whose experience demonstrated what could happen to those who got in the firing line *of things*. Maria had been a teacher of Ukrainian, but her employment was terminated due to her hesitation to abide by the locally imposed rules. Ali told me more about how a flag played a key part in this:

Maria was from the western Ukraine, and until the very last moment she would not let the Ukrainian flag be taken down at school, and, naturally, she was fired. [...] She taught

Ukrainian language and literature. She was one of those people who simply loved her culture so much. She was always seen in a red bead necklace. Of course, the locals made fun of her, but it seemed to me that this was her national identity. She dressed in an embroidered shirt. There were shawls, like Ukrainian shawls, she would wear. She was very patriotic.

Maria's refusal to remove the flag was the last straw, leading to the termination of her job. Moreover, the abuse over Ukrainian national symbols reported here was something Maria couldn't 'bear' and this is what forced the woman to leave Crimea, as we find out later in the interview. To support her statements about the teacher's 'patriotic' position, here, too, Ali relies on the things Maria wore on her body. These are the materialities of Ukrainian nationhood, the objects associated with 'traditional' Ukrainian attire – the red bead necklace, the embroidered shirt, the Ukrainian shawl – all functioning as the bodily stylizations that reveal the teacher's 'patriotic' position (cf. Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 163-196). These are named as features of her out-of-placeness in Crimea, often leading to her being mocked at school. Maria's attempts to temporarily postpone the erasure of the Ukrainian flag are remarkable. We do not know what kind of manoeuvring was required, but we know that her act had a charisma for Ali, as seen in the delight and admiration she expressed in the interview. In Maria's attempts to keep the flag and not compromise her sense of self, she was made redundant and was forced to leave.

Maria's resistance to the erasure of the flag here reveals a different function of the flag. The Ukrainian flag, initially designed to index Ukrainian nationhood, takes on another symbolic function. Its presence, as well as the presence of the teacher who fought for it to remain on the roof of the school, became a source of disturbance. To keep the Ukrainian flag, and to pledge loyalty to it, meant to step out of line. It is this secondary symbolic role, that of the Ukrainian flag 'entrenched in human's interactional dynamics' (Peña-Alves, 2020: 388), which was to account for Maria's dismissal and further relocation.

The Ukrainian flags as 'absent presences' (see Kerfoot & Tatah, 2017; Kulick, 2003, 2005), as symbolically loaded materialities, litter the stories of successful and failed manoeuvres for dissent. As we can see in the narrative of the absence of the teacher and the absence of the flag, these missing bodies and objects, which animated stories of the past, still haunt the storytellers in the present. Metapragmatically identified objects reanimate the chronicles of resistance to past erasures. Coming to life when entextualized in the interview, they are discursively constructed as political actants. The things and their thingy power can reveal the traces of erasures intertwined with the condensed stories participants were still carrying around as memories of manoeuvring for dissent.

3.3. A head wreath: downgrading weapons to aesthetics

Whilst manoeuvring through layered meanings of signs allowed Maria to maintain her position in the fight only temporarily, others have reported some more agile responses. It is worth considering Kim's experiences of relocating to another 'big city'. Leaving her familiar environment, she was warned to be more careful in the ways she styled her body, since, as mentioned earlier, she did not make a secret of her position and was keen to express it through 'symbolics'.

This time, our conversation evolved around a head wreath, another well-known element of Ukrainian folk costume. As Kim explains, she and her friends used to wear the head wreath as a sign of support for Ukraine:

We continued to resist. Head wreaths were just a harmless option –if [*someone were to*] pick on it, we could say, ‘Well wreaths are not only worn by Ukrainians’. But we understood, that is, when we put something on ourselves, we thought [*first*] of how we saw it on ourselves. In other words, so to say, it’s like a meaning of a tattoo – everyone can see it, but only we know [*what it means*].

Manoeuvring through the ‘different orders and regimes of understanding com[ing] together through moments of dissonance, disagreement, and contest’ (Stroud, 2015b: 15), Kim restyled her body to hide her support of a certain camp. When moving across different spaces within Crimea, aware of the likely threats, Kim would put certain symbolics on display in well-known places, while removing it in less familiar environs.

Kim regrets that there’s no photograph left of the head wreath (‘веночек’) to share with me, and perhaps to prove the existence of such an item in her wardrobe. But, more importantly, we can see how she constructs the object as a ‘harmless’ accessory. It was hard to ‘pick on’ the head wreath, she continues, since if anyone questioned her, she could always fall back on the excuse that this attire was not exclusively ‘worn by Ukrainians’. In case of need, even of danger, she could easily downgrade the bodily arsenal interwoven in her hair to ‘mere’ practicalities or aesthetics, keeping open an exit from risky situations. By preserving the plurality of the meanings of the head wreath, as well as the adjustability of her intentions when displaying it, Kim could continue her transgressive work.

Kim provides reflexive readings of the purposes and thoughts she and others used to have before making the decision to exhibit the disputable object. Just like a tattoo, she says, no one *really* knew what they were showing, but they *did* know. Similar to Peck and Stroud’s (2015) discussion on skinscapes, where tattoos reveal a non-congruence with place as less transient inscriptions on the bodily surface, so here semiotically styled bodies as modalities and objects were adapted and strategically utilized to express disavowal of new normativities and reclaim the sense of self in a certain space. The affordance of a head wreath to be taken for an accessory – not a weapon – facilitated its adjustability and reorientation to multiple publics, hence enabling manoeuvring through ideologically contested spaces. The extension of meanings attached to individuals/things allowed their reorganization and resignification in various contexts. When surrounded by friends, Kim could openly declare her political views and her claims for nationhood. When leaving familiar environments, she could (re)style herself in accordance with the places she found herself (cf. Stroud, 2015b: 12).

3.4. Certificate of madness to excuse difference

In the previously discussed examples, manoeuvring was enabled through a skilful juxtaposition of human and non-human subjects. As seen, objects could advance interactions forward, taking an active part in social lives. For one individual, Tatiana, this object was much more unusual: a certificate of madness from the hospital. Her diagnosis was metapragmatically positioned as a *carte blanche* for resistance, as the resource enabling her work of dissent. As Kim explained:

In our village there was this woman in a Ukrainian costume with a head wreath [...]. She was given a certificate from the psychiatric hospital that she was insane [*smiles*] and when they went out to protest, she took out this certificate and said, ‘I’m insane, what do you want?’ [*laughs*]. She protested and spoke completely in Ukrainian.

Here Tatiana’s declaration of mental instability provides solid ground for her transgressive work. The certificate from the hospital, as material evidence of her madness, was her ‘get out of jail free’ card, excusing deviant or suspicious behaviour that would earn a sane individual a fine. In manoeuvring through the turbulent and uneasy Crimean realities, madness became a resource that enabled the expression of and excused her difference. Rather than being limited by the normative ideology of what it meant to be insane, with all the resulting restrictions of one’s freedom of movement, here Tatiana’s madness acted to opposite effect, granting her exemption from prosecution.

The madness of a body – supported by the material evidence of a doctor’s certificate – legitimized the body to protest. The madness certificate enabled Tatiana to openly display her Ukrainian attire, her head wreath, and her language without hesitation, since the body was proven mad. The *desubjectivation* of the individual to the mere ‘mad body’, the denial of its own agency for the sake of protest, was taken here as a resource to express political subjectivities out in the open, which otherwise would be considered unsafe. The self could come out unshielded by compromising its claim to a healthy cognitive state. With the removal of her agency in protesting, the body could openly display ‘protesting symbolics’. By relying on the norms of unreasonable behaviour expected from ‘mad’ people as displayed in public, Tatiana could remain *herself*, since her compromise on her mental health was a manoeuvre enough to enable dissent.

As mentioned earlier, objects such as the madness certificate or the head wreath are shown to become active participants once awoken from the dormant state and made meaningful in an unfolding encounter with danger (cf. Peña-Alves, 2020: 386). It is clear too that the objects were denaturalized from their ordinary state and were called into consciousness, regarded, contemplated and appreciated. Objects became complicit in carrying out the transgressive work, they came to aid manoeuvring for dissent. Individuals and objects, discursively constructed and metapragmatically positioned, worked together towards creating symbolic and physical divisions of sameness and otherness, demarcating the borders of othering and belonging.

3.5. Cars masking people

Under conditions of constraint, car rallies were mentioned as another collective act for which participants’ intentionality had to be ‘adapted’ in order to ‘pass’. Bedecked with flags, car rallies had previously been organized as a remembering of contested past events that would otherwise not be allowed to take place in the open urban spaces. When collective assemblies dedicated to certain events of the past were disallowed, new forms of commemoration evolved in that space, simultaneously expressing the voices of discontent and protest.

Ali recalls that public assemblies accompanied by car rallies used to take place ‘in every town’. Each and every individual felt a ‘duty’ to participate, without ‘being forced’. People would come to remember and pay tribute to the past. They used to learn ‘with their mother’s milk’ that this was the right thing to do. Once restrictions on public assembly were put in place, ‘people were afraid’ to continue to do this. When I enquired about car rallies, Ali

revealed that they continued to take place for a while after the restrictions, but with some amendments to their semiotic look. Previously, cars drove in a single column, honking their horns. Since the restrictions intensified, participants had to avoid 'strict lines' when driving in cars, to escape likely trouble. As we discussed:

- Natalia: And was it the car rally when everybody used to honk at the same time?
Ali: They honked, and cars were decorated with flags and drove in a column.
Natalia: Were they still allowed to do it that way?
Ali: Well, if *[there was]* no line, but *[if]* you were simply driving, then, maybe, it was allowed *[Laughs]*.

When faced with a loss of opportunities to express a sense of collectivity, new forms evolved to allow people to honour the past. Besides adapting the appearance of the car rallies, processions also moved to digital spaces, where profile images 'had to be' adapted on certain days – something 'was added' on Remembrance Day, Ali says. 'More legal things' replaced the earlier practices of collective assemblies. 'Flags on cars' and 'more modest things', indexed collective assemblies without collective gatherings.

Being denied the evident visibility of protesting in the public spaces of urban squares, protestors enabled the presence of their bodies by hiding them in cars. They also disguised the impression of cohesion by avoiding rigid and well-structured columns or 'lines' of vehicles. The absence of a line of cars, just like the absence of immediate human bodies whose presence could indicate protest, allowed the dissent to take place, albeit in a different form.

Under conditions where the scope for protest diminished, and where attempts to gather collectively were met with hostility, new forms of protest emerged. Semiosis helped to reveal bodies as vulnerable – but also, in their opposition, as political sites. Though the instances of disorientation to which an individual became exposed when violence was exercised revealed the 'volatility of one's 'place'' (Butler, 1997: 4), these moments of exposure could be played with and transformed into performances of counter-action and resistance (Butler 1997/2008: 40-41).

Instead of accepting their assigned place, participants manoeuvred their way through the ideologically suppressed environment. They expressed their difference through the resignification of conventionalised meanings of semiosis. Though being positioned in a particular structurally shaped environment, the performative power of semiosis was recognized and further utilized to resist subjugation and circumvent imposed norms and constraints. Performative (re)enactments produced new contexts, bringing to the surface the potential of semiosis to divorce previous meanings and enable individuals to protest.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study has illuminated some instances of manoeuvring for dissent in an environment affected by change. The experiences of the two Crimean inhabitants show that in times when active protest was said to diminish, more sophisticated ways of expressing dissent were worked out. Dissent was made possible through the common achievement of human and non-human actors partaking in the meaning-making processes. As individuals sought assistance

from things, so things acted upon individuals, materially impacting their life trajectories. These dialogic processes have been shown to constitute a protest in which the most mundane objects came to significantly contribute to meaningful, and sometimes even radical, interactional outcomes. The analysis has shown, on the one hand, how speakers found recourse to mundane things, such as key chains, pens, T-shirts, by using them as ideological weapons when making contesting claims for national belonging (§3.1). In this discussion, the particular affordances of the objects to be utilized for protest provided possibilities for manoeuvre. On the other hand, analysis further exemplified and highlighted that the agency of things was not always easily predictable, and, justifiably, required caution (§3.2). Materialities such as the flag are shown to make individuals vulnerable, siting them in the firing line, suggesting agency on the things' end, and emphasizing the inter-relationality of individuals and symbolically loaded objects.

How individuals navigate turbulent contexts and discursively construct new social, ethnic and/or linguistic identities in multilingual environments has long been the focus of sociolinguistic research (cf. Borba, 2017; Cresswell & Martin, 2012; Kerfoot & Tatab, 2017; Makoni, 2020; Stroud, 2015). Similarly, various studies have been undertaken to explore the individuals' responses from below in situations of disempowerment and discrimination across geographical settings. From the perspective of semiotic landscapes scholarship, Borba (2017) offered a persuasive analysis of a counter-action to violence with hope. Bridging together Butler's (1997) historicity of emplaced signs with Ahmed's (2004: 6) take on emotional and social boundaries between Self and Others, Borba (2017) suggested *acts of hope* as a way to operationalize resistance to hate speech. He argued that resistance was 'fuelled by acts of hope, which aim to temporally and geographically reorient power relations and, in the case of LL [linguistic landscapes], scopic and affective regimes by promoting a shift in the way we see and emotionally experience places' (Borba, 2017: 7). In another study dealing with the performativity of self, Busi Makoni (2020: 67) suggested *acts of passing* when considering the individuals' adaptations to risky situations by strategic application of various semiotic resources in order to 'pass' as the member of a dominant group. These acts involved the disguising of perceivably negative aspects of one's own identity, through, for example, using Afrikaans and skin bleaching to 'pass' as South African in light of the possible risk of oppression.

While in these acts the individuals attempted to intentionally 'pass' as what they were *not* by compromising the self, in this study, the dynamics is reversed. In order to be oneself, one had to maneuver through audiences and spaces and accordingly adjust one's intentionality to protest. Moreover, in relation to Borba's (2017) study, while an instance of manoeuvring might be characterised as an *act of hope*, not every act of hope is a manoeuvring act. As was shown with the examples from Kim and Ali, experiences of loss shaped their and others' responses to dispossession. Some people were unable/unwilling to read the situation in which they found themselves (§3.2). The Ukrainian teacher was seen to openly resist the face of power, without hiding her intentions or accounting for turbulence. She chose not to make sense of the power pertinent to language and refused to compromise her sense of self. In another extreme case, the certificate of madness (§3.4) was used as a smart move for dissent. Stories like this reveal complex engagements with resisting semiosis, manoeuvring to protest at the expense of some *one* (e.g. the subject's mental capabilities) or some *thing* (e.g. the function of an object as *not* protesting symbolics, but an accessory). Manoeuvring involved the possibility of intervention on the subject's or object's end, as well as the navigation of the openness of meaning and fluidity of intentions. The discussed acts of resistance could be easily hidden, adjusted, transformed and even eliminated, when the subject was confronted

with danger. Manoeuvring dissent in such constrained conditions was built on disguised performative acts that transgressed and incited (Butler, 1997/2014). In contrast to wearing ‘face-concealing garments’ or ‘fighting the police’ (Kitis & Milani, 2015: 271), identified as straightforward activities revealing protestors identities, here interpretative contestation (Wee & Goh, 2020: 21) and resignification of meanings was required. The acts of manoeuvring in this study allowed individual subjects to bring across and acknowledge their senses of Self, but also to make visible, albeit hidden, their own contested positionalities.

In the participants’ views, everyday activities and objects became part and parcel of the ideological war. At that time, cars, pens, badges, and key chains with imprinted national colours came to be enregistered (Agha, 2007: 55) as everyday political objects causing distress for participants. Describing the objects that were used ‘everywhere’, Kim recalled a ‘war’, where the rival parties acted as confronting ‘walls’, expressing antagonistic political subjectivities through the competing colours of national flags.

We can see both the situated use of these artefacts to make individual political alliances and solidarities visible, but also an interpretation of the affordances of things. The affordances of everyday objects in national colours represented political stakes. When pursuing everyday activities such as writing with a political pen, opening a house door with a political key or doing your hair with political hair bands, individuals entered the realm of politics. Laying bare their solidarities with an imagined community of a Ukrainian nation by resemiotizing (Iedema, 2003) the attributes of their citizenship in everyday objects, speakers found recourse in things, using them as weapons. In other situations, things acted on individual speakers, whose proximity to those things stripped them of their agency and reduced them to mere ‘moving objects’ that quickly became walking targets.

Things, people, languages, and places became part of the turbulent ontology along which the orders and disorders of the world were unfolding (Cresswell & Martin, 2012: 2012; Stroud, 2015: 208). Caught in times of turbulent transition, material objects intended as protesting symbolics visualized and brought to the surface otherwise ‘invisible and taken-for-granted’ (Cresswell & Martin, 2012: 525) political subjectivities. Political stakes and coordinates of participants were made clear and projected outwards through objects that extended the selves (Peck & Stroud, 2015). The metapragmatically identified acts of protest required a considerable manoeuvring through absence and presence: the non-human objects were yet to be invented across the ‘visible structure of the world’ and ‘the invisible realm of tools’ (Harman, 2002: 19). The very being of the semiosis of protest involved its ‘withdrawal from any presence’ (Smith, 2004). If, in another study, non-existence was taken as another semiotic resource that constituted a presence in semiotic landscapes – not negating the past, but adding new layers of meaning through attempts to ascribe nothingness (cf. Karlander, 2019), here the opposite was true: the presence of the semiosis implied its very absence through presumed *denial*.

The ethnographic data analysed in this study suggests that the possibility of *denial* lies inherent to the acts of manoeuvring that enabled dissent. The affordances of the objects discussed provided possibilities for their *trivialization* (e.g. a key chain) or *destruction* (e.g. party balloons, sweets) by accentuating the functionality of objects (§3.1 and §3.2). The affordances of the head wreath allowed for the *downgrading* of the protest object to mere aesthetics, with the pre-planned strategy of semiotic readjustment (§3.3). In the instance of the madness certificate, the affordances of the certificate enables the denial of political agency and the disavowal of subject’s mental capacities through *desubjectivation* of an

individual to a mere mad body (§3.4). Lastly, the car protest permitted the *concealed cohesion* of protesting bodies masked by cars (§3.5), disguising the impression of a collective action. These instances all illuminate the potential interplay of individuals and things in provoking and inciting uneasy and thought-through manoeuvres for resistance in everyday encounters.

In the context of this study, to manoeuvre meant to account for the terms of one's own vulnerability, but also to realize the affordances and limitations of one's place. Manoeuvring for resistance involved the circumvention of implicit and explicit meanings, the disguise of intentions in front of the wrong audiences, and the choice of appropriate spaces where conventionalised meanings of semiosis could be renegotiated and crafted. To know the conventions and norms, especially when becoming dispossessed, conferred the ability to navigate multiple scales of meaning. It also involved a readjustment to the violence of the past. It assumed the ability to anticipate the next turn and to renegotiate the functions of semiosis. The knowledge of what signs and languages were publicly unacceptable and what appropriateness parameters applied to stylizations of one's own body in specific places was indispensable for such manoeuvres. In other words, one had to know where one would need a shield and where it was safe to take it off and be oneself. Acts of manoeuvring, involving a careful interplay of human and non-human subjects in the navigation of meaning, balancing between limitations and affordances, were shown to be indispensable for resistance in dispossession.

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