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“Our nation is just trying to rebirth right now”: constructing Crimean Tatar spaces of otherwise through Linguistic Citizenship

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Abstract: This paper aims to make visible the alternative social projects hidden beneath everyday Crimean Tatar landscapes. Drawing on audio recordings and field data from interviews and narrated walking tours led by young citizens, it illuminates how these spaces of otherwise emerge and are co-constructed through participants’ re-readings of material artifacts, resemiotisation of place semiotics and resignification of communal spaces. Participants navigate among such spaces, negotiating the legacies of historical acts of material, cultural, and linguistic dispossession and disruption as well as the contemporary forms that such acts take. In narrating semiotic landscapes, participants perform acts of Linguistic Citizenship, a concept that recognizes that speakers express agency, voice, and participation through a variety of semiotic means; they engage or disengage with political institutions of the state and advance claims for alternative forms of belonging. This paper thus expands semiotic landscape research through its design as a linguistic ethnography, using interactional data to account for individuals’ perceptions of place. It also adds to research on Linguistic Citizenship by foregrounding invisibilized linguistic repertoires and performative acts of meaning-making in a charged political context.

Keywords: Linguistic Citizenship; semiotic landscape; linguistic ethnography; (in)visibility; erasure; resemiotisation

1 Introduction

I remember when the transition took place in 2014,
we [our school] boycotted Russian and only tried to speak Ukrainian.

Nina, from the interview

Crimean Tatar school children were taken aback when one morning they found out that Crimea was no longer Ukraine, but a new republic of the Russian Federation.

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Instead of leaving politics to the realm of politicians, the students overnight took what was not yet stolen from them – the Ukrainian language – to protest. By holding true to the Ukrainian language and thus wilfully refusing to accept the new Russian reality, young citizens claimed their political allegiances with the Ukrainian state. In doing so, they performed acts of Linguistic Citizenship, actively opposing the “transition” that was being enforced. As this study shows, in addition to the detrimental consequences of Russia’s recent annexation of Crimea on individuals’ lives and their linguistic practices, the events of the more distant past – the forceful deportation of Crimean Tatars in the 1940s – also continue to haunt young people today. Beyond performing words in a certain language, speakers resist obliteration by recollecting their pasts and undoing injustice by semiotically reconstructing bygone landscapes.

Drawing on audio recordings and field data from interviews and narrated walking tours collected by the author in Crimea during September and October 2019, this linguistic ethnography deploys an eclectic approach to the study of semiotic landscapes to make visible the alternative social projects hidden beneath everyday Crimean Tatar sceneries. As will be shown, although primarily designed to capture the daily spaces of present-day occupation, the walking tour and interview data used in this paper reveal an unfolding of Crimean Tatar spaces of otherwise – those social projects that vacillate between potentiality and risk (Povinelli 2011a: 7, 11). Participants navigate among such spaces, performatively opposing the legacies of historical acts of material, cultural, and linguistic dispossession and disruption (cf. Butler and Athanasiou 2013) and the contemporary forms that such acts take.

As socially invested, multi-layered, constitutive elements of space (cf. Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Stroud and Mpendukana 2009; Zabrodskaja and Milani 2014), the study of semiotic landscapes foregrounds the analysis of meaning-making practices through various semiotic means, thus reaffirming the status of everyday landscapes of occupation as arenas of contestation, negotiation, and conflict (cf. Ben-Rafael et al. 2006; Blackwood et al. 2016; Rubdi and Ben Said 2015). In narrating the semiotic landscapes through which they walk, participants perform acts of Linguistic Citizenship (cf. Lim et al. 2018; Stroud 2001, 2015, 2018; Stroud and Kerfoot 2021), expressing their agency and voice through a variety of semiotic means; engaging or disengaging with political institutions of the state; and advancing claims for alternative forms of belonging.

Drawing from and seeking to develop linguistic ethnographic scholarship, this paper attends specifically to the ways in which participants recollect their individual (and simultaneously collective) past when interacting with semiotic landscapes. It illuminates how participants narrate spaces of otherwise in as far as they make visible the spatiotemporal frames at work in such spaces by reading the semiotic
landscape visible in the present, thus evoking layered historical and contemporary experiences (cf. Backhaus 2007; Blommaert 2010; Train 2016).

In brief, the paper attends to the ways spaces of otherwise emerge through interactions between the researcher, participants and landscapes. Studying interactional data, it also adds to research on Linguistic Citizenship by foregrounding invisibilized linguistic repertoires and performative acts of meaning-making in a charged political context.

In the following sections, I will situate the study historically by introducing the Crimean Tatar history of dispossession. The events of the Crimean Tatar deportation under Stalin in 1944, their return in late 1980s-early 1990s, and an attempted reconstitution of the past, are pieced together with the recent occupation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 (Section 2). This section is followed by the theorisation of Crimean Tatar spaces of otherwise along with the discussion of Linguistic Citizenship (Section 3). Subsequently, I introduce the study participants (Section 4), present the analysis (Section 5) and end with a discussion and concluding points (Section 6).

### 2 Resisting dispossession

The events of the Crimean annexation in March 2014 and the subsequent international sanctions added new dimensions of uncertainty in Crimea. Sensing isolation from the rest of the world, people lived under the conditions of shadowy legislation, immobility and stagnation. In this light, the position of Crimean Tatars as an ethnic group that actively boycotted the Crimea referendum in March 2014 is especially vulnerable, as evident in the reports of flagrant rights violations carried out against them. A number of critically minded Crimean Tatars were reportedly tortured and many today are still declared missing. In addition to these everyday interventions, since the shift of power in Crimea, the work of the Crimean Tatar executive-representative body Mejlis has been outlawed on the grounds of “extremism” in 2016; major Crimean Tatar political figures have been banned from the territory of the peninsula; and Crimean Tatar traditional assemblies have been disallowed (Amnesty 2015, 2016; Korostelina 2015: 42–43).

The discourse of Crimean Tatars’ being “out of place” in Crimea stretches from the post-war period back to the 1940s, as the map of the Soviet Union was significantly re-designed (Hirsch 2005: 311). Shortly after the liberation of the Crimean ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) from the Nazi regime, between May and June 1944, 195,200 individuals from the “Crimean contingent” – Crimean Tatars, Armenians, Greeks, and Bulgarians – were forcefully deported from the Crimean territory. In just three days between the 18th and 20th of May 1944, 191,044 Crimean Tatars were displaced to the predominantly Uzbek Soviet Republic, where, in the first
years of exile 46.2% of Crimean Tatars died due to disease and hunger, according to the self-conducted census (Kurtseitov 2017: 224–225).

The forceful deportation of ethnic minorities, referred to in literature as “cultural ethnocide” (Abdulvapov 2018: 28), “genocide” (Kurtseitov 2017: 229) or, in relation to the erasure of geographical names, as “toponymic repression” (Polian 2004: 152), deprived the people of their humanity and agency. During their absence in Crimea, the Crimean Tatar people’s history was erased, and their knowledge rendered invisible. Upon the Crimean Tatar deportation, Soviet authorities filled the subsequent empty houses with Slavic populations, thereby expanding the process of Slavonisation within the Crimean territory. Examples of this invisibilization include renaming Crimean Tatar toponyms, destroying Islamic cemeteries, repurposing mosques, and obliterating Crimean Tatar history in textbooks (Sobolieva 2019: 119).

The physically enforced deportation of people, coupled with the erasure of their legacy, created conditions where “one was fundamentally dependent upon the terms that one never chose in order to emerge as intelligible beings” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 79). The Soviet acts of dispossession disowned Crimean Tatars of their land, subjected them to state violence, and deconstituted their bodies as if they no longer mattered, thus pushing the Crimean Tatar ethnic group, alongside other expelled minorities, into precarity. Exposure to such political forms of dispossession also led to resistance (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 111).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when returning to Crimea in mass waves of repatriation, Crimean Tatars sought to both renegotiate the conditions of their presence and repair the injustices of the past (Sobolieva 2019: 121). By resisting the otherness imposed upon them, many Crimean Tatars rejected their assigned place as outside of Crimea, thus challenging the normative ideas of belonging and hence echoing Santos’ call to recognise absent knowledges and reclaim lost agency (Kerfoot and Hyltenstam 2017b: 2; Santos 2014: 154). Upon return, initially with the goal to resettle in the places of their former residence in the predominantly coastal areas, Crimean Tatars found their calls for land declined. This forced many Crimean Tatar returnees to occupy alternative less lucrative pieces of territory near urban centres. One such place is the micro-district Aqmeçit. Even though the micro-district was founded 30 years ago and counts more than 5,000 residents, it remains invisible on geographic maps.

3 Enacting Linguistic Citizenship, constructing spaces of otherwise

Approaching the Crimean Tatar district Aqmeçit as a space that has emerged out of a history of subjugation, this paper attempts to capture the elements that constitute its “otherwise”. The question, in a most general sense, is how Aqmeçit in particular
and Crimean Tatar spaces of otherwise in general, can be understood as they unfold in the walking tour with participants. Described as evolving social projects that go beyond “simple human sociality or human beings” (Povinelli 2011a: 7), spaces of otherwise can effectively be grasped with the sensitising concept of Linguistic Citizenship (Stroud 2001, 2018). Piecing together language, materialities, bodies, subjectivities, and memories (Bock and Stroud 2019: 5; Peck et al. 2019), the analysed acts of Linguistic Citizenship allow a re-centring of individual agency and participation outside of the dominant frameworks of the state. Linguistic Citizenship figures as a productive framework to examine the spaces of otherwise as they are experienced and structured by participants’ interpretations, often unconsciously influenced by their spatial and conceptual awareness (Peck et al. 2019: 8).

Carrying the potential of disruptive action, the workings of Linguistic Citizenship allow us to unthink dominant structures. They subvert the idea of one legitimate power centre, or epistemological authority, by operating “outside of those prescribed or legitimated in institutional frameworks of the state” (Stroud 2018: 4). In this way, Linguistic Citizenship is productive in analysing spaces of otherwise as social projects that are “at odds with dominant, and dominating, modes of being” (Povinelli 2011b). By analysing the various modalities and semiotic resources that individuals use (Iedema 2003; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Kerfoot 2011), it is possible to grasp the material realizations of voice and visibility (Deumert 2018: 289). In this sense, the narrated walking tour, being itself an act of political participation and performance, unlocks the semiotic and linguistic practices of the inhabitants of the Crimean Tatar district of Aqmeçít as materialised acts of Linguistic Citizenship, tracing the relations of power in material artefacts (e.g., elements of the environment such as car tyres, street name signs, flags, city limit signs) with which the participants are seen to engage. Such material realizations of individuals’ political speakerhood (Stroud 2018: 4) are understood through the notion of resemiotisation (Iedema 2003; Kerfoot 2011), a re-signifying process which discourses undergo while they take on various material forms.

4 Meeting the research participants

I met Nina, Ayperi, and Edie,1 the participants of this study, at an educational institution where I gave lectures and led English and German speaking clubs during

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1 Prior to the data elicitation, each participant signed an informed consent document, in which the project aims, and ethics statement were provided. It informed the participants of their guaranteed anonymity, the ways in which I would make certain the confidential treatment of personal data, and the possibility for them to withdraw from the project partially or totally at any stage. By signing the
my fieldwork stay. At the end of one of the sessions where I described my research interest in the semiotic landscapes of Crimea, Nina came up with an idea to introduce me to the caves in one of Simferopol’s districts. She mentioned that the names of these caves were remarkable as they were nowhere to be found on any official maps. Intrigued by this idea, we agreed to meet, and Nina’s friends, Ayperi and Edie, joined us. All three women were in their 20s and were multilingual speakers of Russian, Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar, and even some Turkish. As ambitious learners of English and generous hosts, they agreed to spend time with me and help me with my project.

I shared my trajectory and research interests with the participants. Although we had similar linguistic backgrounds (except for my lack of knowledge in Crimean Tatar and Turkish), I had never lived in Crimea, and my knowledge of the region was limited. They knew that I was born and studied in the adjacent Ukrainian region of Kherson, that I had spent years in German and English-speaking countries, and that I came to Crimea from Sweden to conduct my fieldwork. Given my journey and the tense political situation in the region, it made sense to downplay potential tensions related to the choice of Russian or Ukrainian languages by primarily using English when meeting the students and participants. Speaking English at the initial stages allowed me to create distance from ethno-linguistic debates surrounding the Ukrainian and Russian languages in Crimea. Instead, the use of English emphasized the pragmatic decision to practice a foreign language together. Typically, during classes, I would introduce myself in Russian, the language predominantly spoken at the institution, and then announce a transition to English (or German), justifying the shift with the need to practice the foreign language. Except in situations where speaking a foreign language was negotiated, the lingua franca between the participants and me was Russian.

The participants in the study were not treated as mere informants or respondents, but as knowers (Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele 2022) and co-creators of knowledge. Alongside my participants, I engaged in the production of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) and never claimed to speak “on their behalf” (Milani and Lazar 2017: 314). With my researcher’s position entangled with those of my participants, I recognized my undeniable impact on perceiving, interpreting and acknowledging certain signs (Pennycook 2020: 231). In other words, apart from being an engaged listener, scarce speaker, and intense interpreter, I did not see myself as completely separated or distant from the participants and the landscapes we encountered.

Along more traditional interviews as research methods, the walking tour approach (Garvin 2010; Lou 2017; Stroud and Jegels 2014; Szabó and Troyer 2017; Trumper-Hecht 2010) taken in this study allowed for “greater space and form, the participants agreed to my making audio recordings of both the walking tours and the interviews, with the former conducted collectively and the latter individually.
independence to the participant’s agency” (Pietikäinen 2012), balancing the power between study participants and researcher. This walking tour design set minimal demands on participants. As I described my research to young people, I asked them to show me any places they know which they deemed interesting. As a response to my call, the three women came up with suggestions. Edie brought us to a beautiful and centrally located botanic garden in Simferopol, the place “where one could forget about everyday life”. Ayperi invited us to a settlement called Gvardejskoie. And Nina offered to give us a tour through the cliffs close to the Crimean micro-district Aqmeçit. It is this three-hour-long walking tour conducted by Nina that I am going to focus on during the analysis.

5 Analysing and making visible spaces of otherwise on the route: from natural beauty to deportation

On the day of the tour, we met at the Central Market in Simferopol, took a marshrutka ride to the micro-district of Aqmeçit, and once there, I started recording. We began the tour on Ak-Kaya Street and ascended the hills toward Qayalar Mountain, which was situated between the Zalissya and Fontany districts (see Figure 1). We then continued through the southern edge of Fontany and retraced our steps back to the

![Figure 1: Cliffs of Qayalar Mountain. Photo by the author.](image-url)
The starting point of our tour in the Aqmeçıt micro-district. Along the way, we took a coffee break at the local store Bizim Market, and afterward, we proceeded to visit the microdistrict’s landmark – the white mosque Aqmeçıt Dzhamı on Ozenbash Street. Our tour concluded at the banquet hall Eshıl ada, where, on that day, September 15th, 2019, the first Crimean Tatar book fair was held.

Leading us on the walking tour, Nina aimed to share the “beauty of the place” that she knew so well. Right from the start, Nina guided us away from the settlements and toward the cliffs of Qayalar, leaving behind the signs of civilization and revealing the magnificent vistas of uninhabited landscapes before our eyes (see Figure 1).

Nina adopted the role of guide, which was discernible from her multiple openings and theme suggestions, as well as from her willingness to share her knowledge of the place’s history. Starting from ages ago (200 BC), she explained to us when the first Crimean Tatar settlement was founded in the region:

**Extract 1: Nina’s walking tour**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nina</th>
<th>so (0.5) like (.) firstly (.) settlements of our city like Simferopol was uh (.) Неаполь [Скифский]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>[uh huh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Scythian Ne::: Neapolis. (( a car approaches )) It’s uh located in (.) other place (3.0) (( the car halts near our group and the driver inside the car asks for directions while the engine is on. Nina gives a few instructions in Russian and the car drives away )) (…) So uh the Neapolis was the first settlement of the Scythian tribes and located in other site (( a car passes by)) also a great [place]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayperi</td>
<td>(place to visit) also cause I’ve never been there (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>I’ve also never been but I want to maybe the next time we will get it (…) (( Natalia takes photographs of landscapes )) so if you maybe heard about uh like uh (0.5) the old city (of) the old [town of the]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>[uh huh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>uh it was like uh and uh one of the (. ) first Crimean Tatar settlements uh before the deportation (.) before the Russian invasion in the (. ) eighteenth [century]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>[uh huh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>uh so uh when uh::: (.) &gt;it was deportation&lt; (.) the people came back (.) from the Asia (.) here (.) like they settled some new districts Хошкельди (. ) Каменка (( translated from Russian as Khoshkeldy, Kamenka )) &gt;in the beginning of the Simferopol&lt; and also it was (. ) Ак-Мечеть (( translated from Russian as Ak-Mechet ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>uh huh.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nina’s historical introduction (Extract 1) extended the emergence of a figured world to the past of Scythian Neapolis, a time when the first documented trace of human presence in the proximity of today’s Simferopol was recorded. The ancient Tatar town Aqmeçıt situated on the Salgir River used to be a significant cultural centre, with a residence of Kalga Sultan – the second person after the Crimean Chan
(cf. Babenko and Dulichev 2008). After the first annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in 1783, Aqmeçit transformed into the “Old Town” (Figure 2), and after May 1785, the city started to bear a new Greek name – Simferopol (O’Neill 2006: 169).

While I grew increasingly impatient about the tour to these beautiful cliffs, eager to explore what could be termed “cultural” aspects of the landscape, Nina seemed fascinated by the environment devoid of any human-made signs. It was only on our way back north to the settlements of Fontany and Aqmeçit, as we passed by the houses, heard the barking dogs, and left behind the clouds of dust while navigating the dried-out streets, that a rich semiotic landscape of deeply painful intergenerational narratives of Crimean Tatar deportation, return, and ongoing revival became vividly present. These stories had indeed always been there, though not immediately visible.

5.1 Car tyres as materialised histories of dispossession

After departing from the rocky cliffs of Qayalar, we reached the regions of Fontany and continued walking through Aqmeçit. While passing by the dry, empty fields,

Figure 2: A map of the walking tour.
I was taken aback by the sight of piles of car tires. Intrigued, I asked about the reason behind placing them there (Extract 2). It was at that moment when Nina recalled the contested history of Crimean Tatars in the region. Once seemingly barren landscapes appeared to take on new, yet deeply rooted, meanings.

**Extract 2:** Nina’s walking tour

| Natalia | why do they have uh (0.3) wheels ↑ the wheels right (.) the wheels |
| Nina | uh I think it’s just like uh the::: (.) fence for the (hhh) future (.) territory (.) and just the like uh the::: (.) the time [uh:::] (( Natalia takes photograph )) |
| Ayperi | [time solution] (hhh) ↑ |
| Natalia | aha yeah >I understand< (.) like to show there would be something but not now yeah ↑ |
| Ayperi | [yeah] |
| Nina | [uh huh] (...) when the >Crimean Tatars< (.) got back to (.) this place< (.) hhh uh (.) it was called li:::ke uh::: (3.0) >самозахват< (translated from Russian as land-squatting) uh caus:::e they have no (.) even right to go back and to uh have houses (( Natalia takes photographs )) >their own< houses when they were deported a:::nd th they’ve just uh took all the ((( strong wind blows ))) ( territories ) (.) it was almost like uh::: >thirty or forty years ago< but uh it’s still a problem (.) like uh [they] |
| Natalia | [uh huh] |
| Nina | only built their [houses] |
| Natalia | [yeah] |
| Nina | and it’s hard to::: (.) have a permission to (.) live in there (.) (hhh) cause it’s almost [uh:::] |
| Natalia | even now? |
| Nina | even now (...) it’s very hard in Russia now for people to::: get their houses like::: legally (.) when they just uh wanted to build something on their lands they uh just breaking breaking the houses uh just uh go away you are not living here it’s not officially and why they like this place is called uh (.) the streets of this place are called by numbers because officially they were not uh a settlement or any city or any town (.) this was just the like act of uh >taking it< by uh (.) their will so uh (.) that’s the problem |

The car tyres in this location reminded Nina of the days when Crimean Tatars were denied the right to return and reside in Crimea (Figure 3). Without legal entitlements to the land, those Crimean Tatars who returned from exile started appropriating pieces of territory and rebuilding their homes using the resources available to them. The car tyres, easily disassembled and universally utilised for various purposes, served as a provisional fence to delineate the boundaries of a future territory, signalling to others that the land plot was already occupied. For Nina, these necessity-driven provisional objects (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009), represented tangible evidence of Crimean Tatar marginalisation, pointing back to other scales of “semiotised space and time” (Blommaert and Leppänen 2015: 121),
such as the events of Crimean Tatar deportation and return intertwined with the history of material deprivation. The fence symbolized the absence of legal support during those times, as Crimean Tatars dared to actively challenge their dispossession, resisting and repairing the injustices of deportation, even if it meant violating the existing legal frameworks. The fence, shadowed by the constant risk of removal and perceived as illegitimate, faced the prospect of becoming a perpetual temporality.

Even seemingly mundane material artifacts could harbor untold stories. The car tyres in this place constituted “wisdoms” (Basso 1996) that I would not have access to if not for my participants. Instead of being mere, bleak geographical locations, the place we traversed was imbued with specific values, memories, and a distinct social order. Although we were there together, the participants had to translate that world into words and articulate the stories “sitting” there, thereby constructing a different order of visibility (cf. Kerfoot and Hyltenstam 2017b; also Jones 2017: 151). Rather than remaining mute, landscapes spoke thanks to, and with, Nina. While guiding us on how to read the environment and its connections with the people and their past, Nina could tear open the fabric of time and space as we moved together. A different world unfolded before our eyes, narrated into being with each step we took. Nina was intimately acquainted with this place. The car tyres we encountered became the first material artifact that seemed to bear the traces of absences and emergences.

Figure 3: A fence made of car tyres. Photo by the author.
5.2 Erased history

On another occasion, participants discussed how the Crimean Tatar street and place names were erased from Crimea once the Crimean Tatars were deported.

**Extract 3: Nina’s walking tour**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nina</th>
<th>after deportation ↓ (.) they were renamed (.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edie</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>almost uh every village that had a Crimean Tatar name was uh (.) like erasing the history (.) so uh even the Simferopol had the [name]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayperi</td>
<td>uh huh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>changed (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayperi</td>
<td>for example Махульдүр now (.) Нагорное ↓ (( Crimean Tatar Mahuldür given the Russian name Nagorno ))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>Нагорное ↓ (( Nagorno )) &gt;so what do you think about it&lt;?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayperi</td>
<td>&gt;I donno&lt; I don’t like it (.) it’s like uh::: the nature of [Crimean]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>[it’s it’s erasing] (.) th the history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayperi</td>
<td>yeah ( yes ) (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>it was made uh (.) in on purpose while uh (2.0) as you can see there’s almost uh::: there almost new [houses]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>[yeah yeah]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>and uh::: because they were built &gt;after deportation&lt; like maybe the most uh::: old houses will be uh near forty maybe thirty years [old]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>[yeah]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>cause uh::: (1.0) and (hhh) it almost like (hhh) building or rebuilding ([ Laugh]) (.) It’s just uh (.) trying to uh (1.0) our like nation is trying to rebirth from the (.) like uh::: (.) they hadn’t anything in Asia and uh::: they hadn’t anything here when they come [firstly]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalia</td>
<td>[uh huh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>but now (hhh) (.) as you can see↑ there (hhh) like (.) item (( Nina points to the Crimean Tatar flag on the fence, see Figure 4. Natalia takes a photograph ))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The renaming of Crimean Tatar villages was perceived as an attempt to erase Crimean Tatar history from Crimea (Extract 3). Depriving Crimea of its Crimean Tatar ‘nature’ went hand in hand with the deliberate repression of the Crimean Tatar language and people from the surface of the peninsula – a phenomenon described by Irvine and Gal (2000: 38) as “erasure”. This ideological process was said to manifest materially and, particularly in the context of the forceful deportation of Crimean Tatars from their dwelling places, also corporeally.

Upon return from exile, Crimean Tatars struggled to reimagine their future and revive what has been lost by leaving a sign of presence. For Nina, the Crimean Tatar flag visible on the fence presupposed the presence of the Crimean Tatar nation, its
“rebirth” (Extract 3) and material reconstruction despite the long history of purposeful erasure. The visibility of the ethnic group has been reclaimed in the built environment as resemiotised in the names of places, Crimean Tatar national imagery and Crimean Tatar language. Upon return, Crimean Tatars built new houses on the initially numbered streets, which only later acquired proper names of the “heroes of the Crimean Tatar nation” (Nina). Some of the houses we passed by were large and well-maintained, while others were visibly built with whatever materials were available. In addition to demarcating the territory by car tyres (Figure 3) and Crimean Tatar flags (Figure 4), the locals sought to leave a lasting trace and a durable presence in Crimea by engraving the Crimean Tatar national symbols into stone when building new homes (Figure 5).

Despite these collective efforts, it was evident that Aqmeçıt struggled to leave behind the history of marginalization: the district was still poorly incorporated into the city’s infrastructure, its territories lacked organization, and the paved roads were missing (Figure 6). Even decades after deportation, the institutionally, economically, and socially peripheral status of the Crimean Tatar ethnic group was echoed in the fragile material presence we could observe on the tour. The place of Crimean Tatars in Crimea has been and still remains precarious.

5.3 Displaced bodies as remembering histories of pain

If in the previous example, the materiality of place semiotics problematises the past, evoking the discourse of “national rebirth”, in this subsection, the link between bodies as they relate to emplaced semiotic landscapes is further pursued.
Figure 5: The symbol of the royal Giray dynasty of Crimea *taraq tamga* (‘the trident of the Girays’) and later the coat of arms of the Crimean Tatars, here ingrained in the architecture. Photo by the author.

Figure 6: Unpaved roads of Aqmeçit. Photo by the author.
Extract 4: Nina’s walking tour.

To correct the wrongdoings of the past, Crimean Tatars supposedly established a “tradition” to “build houses” and instilled a “rule” to grow, with the goal of leaving traces of their own presence. Confronted with and contesting dispossession, Crimean Tatars built, spread, and developed, both materially and bodily, while envisioning a different future and simultaneously exercising their citizenship. In a direct sense, the “rebirth of the nation” (Extract 4) meant an increase of the overall number of Crimean Tatars, who would leave a lasting mark on the surface. Crucially, although the pressure of having as many children as possible decreases with younger generations, who prefer to deploy a “European” perspective on family planning, this idea is still alive and circulating among the participants.
All three participants are excited and willingly share their views, speaking almost in unison, finishing each other’s sentences, as indicated by overlapping utterances, repeated audible exhalations, as well as increased verbal input when discussing this topic (Extract 4). The sense of obligation seems to be inscribed into their bodies: the bodies that are expected to be useful as such that sustain the nation’s revival, as justified through the confrontation with nothing upon return. Here, being (back) in Crimea as a place they desired to return to creates the need for this national reconstruction. Though the imperative to multiply fades with time, Crimea exerts its power upon the Crimean Tatar ethnic group (Stroud 2015: 3), almost pushing them to resist obliteration and avoid repeating history.

5.4 Participants feeling out of place

Prior to the tour, only Nina has been to this area, but despite this, Ayperi and Edie seem to know how to navigate this place. Although on most occasions, Nina played the guide, Ayperi and Edie frequently complemented her narratives about Crimean Tatar struggles. For all the participants, the harrowing events of deportation remain a haunting part of their family legacy. The shared “scope of understandability” (Blommaert and Leppänen 2015: 123) – that is, the common ways in which participants interpret specific signs – stems from similar experiences said to be prevalent in Crimean Tatar families. These experiences include the intergenerational practice of building houses and the national mission to repopulate the land. It is important to note that my participants do not necessarily fully endorse these ways of life themselves. While they acknowledge their significance, the relationship is more nuanced.

Edie does not speak much. During our interview though, the first thing she mentions is the importance of knowing one’s own “roots” and seeing home not as a place where one is born, but “where you feel at home”. She argues that Crimea is rightfully considered a homeland by her parents, even though they were not born there. With this position, Edie problematises common sense assumptions about what is understood as “home”. As she approaches this claim-staking in the light of the events of Crimean Tatar forceful displacement from Crimea and their subsequent return, Edie’s words can be understood as her active stake in rejecting one’s “assigned proper place” which is “non-place” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 22–23) and as an exercise in politics through Linguistic Citizenship.

Reflecting upon her future, Ayperi finds herself caught in the desire to make things right for her “nation” and to embrace the world. She says: “It’s kind of something wrong with me ‘cause my grannies and granddads were aching to come back to Crimea and to live here, in their motherland … and I want to leave”. Ayperi
feels herself to be in debt to her ancestors who suffered immensely to be able to return to Crimea, their historical motherland. In this light, her Crimean Tatar social world is stamped with a debt and credit relationship (cf. Povinelli 2011b), and she approaches her future with a sense of obligations in the present.

Nina, though, is more pragmatic. She says: “Crimea, of course, is a native place and all this, but I wanted to go abroad, I still want to. It is hard to realise oneself in a small village”. Nina is frustrated with the situation and caught in the conditions of the new Crimean reality: “What to do, I just don’t understand at all, because the situation in general ... you are not there, nor here. Well, in Russia, no one needs us either.” The sense of not fitting in, not being needed in Crimea, despite it being a “native place”, unsettles and forces one to think about alternatives. The spaces Nina finds herself in are intertwined, shifting from Crimea as a “native place” to the “small village” of Aqmecit, and then to the “city” Simferopol, where it is hard to become somebody. Nina contrasts her being here and not in demand, “economically coping” as she puts it, to “going abroad” as a more financially prosperous option, even if it would mean compromising one’s own qualifications (“It is much easier to realise oneself abroad and earn more, even if you are uneducated”). On another occasion, she problematizes the use of labels such as “Crimean Tatar”, “Ukrainian”, or “Russian”, opting instead for “being a person at the first place” (Extract 5). When asked about her name, Nina, and whether it is Russian, she responds:

Extract 5: Nina’s walking tour

Nina's walking tour

Nina

uh it's not Russian it's more inte international cause uh (1.0) my mother is uh Crimean Tatar and uh my father is Ukrainian so I'm from like multicultural family (. ) they are ↓divorced of course but uh:::

Natalia

why of course (hhh)

Nina, Ayperi and Edie

(( Laugh ))

Nina

now I donno like uh (2.0) they are divorced now so (1.0) uh::: but I live in a >Crimean Tatar family< (. ) I was raised in a >Crimean Tatar family< and uh::: I (1.0) uh went to the (. ) Crimean Tatar school

Natalia

[uh huh]

Nina

[but] to tell the truth I don't feel like I am only Crimean Tatar cause uh I (. ) can't like (0.5) uh (1.0) neglect (. ) my roots neglect my uh >other family< cause I am also uh >keep in touch< with them [so]

Natalia

[uh huh]

Nina

↑↑I donno it's difficult [cause]

Natalia

[yeah]

Nina

I think that nationality is not that important like uh (. )>you must be a person< at all (. ) in the first place (. ) and uh (. ) after this you just uh (. ) can show your cultural uh education (. ) your cultural (0.5) status by::: having some traditions (. ) having some (. )>special features< (. ) and so on (1.0) so I don't think that (0.5) nationality is the first place (. )
Nina does not want her complex experience and (family) trajectory to be reduced to a mere label or be misinterpreted. Though she grew up in Crimean Tatar traditions, which she respects and aims to maintain, she also has a different page in her family history. She “cannot neglect” her past. At the same time, she points to the difficulties that account for all of her “families”, as seen clearly from the need to explain herself to her grandparents (Extract 5). Despite the internal conflict, when walking in Aqmeçıt together, Nina foregrounds the Crimean Tatar past residing in semiotic landscapes of the present. On the route, she recollects and revives this past and aligns herself for the revival of her “Crimean Tatar nation” (Extract 3), thus opposing its subjugation (Extracts 3 and Extract 7).

5.5 “Astrakhan does not smell like crap”

Landscapes of Aqmeçıt differ from more central parts of Simferopol. Here, the Crimean Tatar language appears more frequently, both in transient hand-made signs and in more durable and expensive ones, indexing not only the presence of Crimean Tatar speakers, but also a different status of the Crimean Tatar language in the semiotic landscape. Commenting on the Crimean Tatars’ land-squatting as it took place upon their return, and on the district’s integration into the city’s infrastructure, Nina points out:

**Extract 6: Nina’s walking tour**

Nina: like the district has uh buses but this (.) is uh the real town ( and has ) no buses >there’s the only one< ninety first one and it goes just only there ( (points to the direction where the bus goes )) it’s very hard for people here to uh::: (., and it’s okay if the weather is sunny (.) windy (.) but when it’s (.) rains [(hhh)]

Natalia: [yeah]

Nina: (( Laughs )) some of them just like I donno eh (.) hate (hhh) this place [cause it’s uh]

Natalia: [yeah yeah]

Nina: there is no road (.) to go (0.5) they are going like (.) by grass (( unclear word or two )) just any other stuff they will find just to get into the (.) bus (.) <they have no other choice> ↓

As Nina says, years after their return, Crimean Tatars still struggle to thrive (Extract 6). It is often difficult to direct the attention of authorities to individuals’ needs, which is why Crimean Tatars are accustomed to relying on their own resources when it comes to getting things done. Instead of providing support, the authorities are known to be yet another source of trouble. On another occasion,
Nina describes how, in a different Crimean Tatar district Lugovoye, the officials were not simply unhelpful, but even disrespectful of the residents’ rights:

**Extract 7: Nina’s interview**

Nina: the issue was acute in the village Lugovoye in the village the village was given new names uh new renamings (hmm) all of them connected with the Russian towns such as Astrakhan street Kostroma Vologda and people were outraged because well how to say they say themselves that about ninety percent of the residents are after all Crimean Tatars and the response to them was that to rename the streets you need to collect at least one percent of the participants of Simferopol in principle residents of Simferopol I don’t know what for and I think this is after all an incitement because I don’t know they are bored to sit there perhaps they want I don’t know add fuel to the fire.

Natalia: who are they well the government of course and uh the management because they are doing it they know perfectly well that this is a micro-district of the Crimean Tatars and they will be outraged because these streets have nothing to do with Crimea at all this is not even this is really out of the blue that’s why that is if we have arguably some streets in honour of trees some fruits and so on and so on well at least they grow on these streets Astrakhan does not smell like crap that’s why they (could not) adequately assess the situation give at least something Crimean if you don’t want Crimean Tatar but frankly just spit in the face of the residents just like this (hmm) in fact it may seem like well what is the name of the street but it really affects because it is (hmm) as my grandma likes to say <they erase history> because we no longer have Crimean Tatar streets thus there is a kind of uh a hint what have you forgotten here you don’t have Crimean Tatar streets the same applies to the renaming of cities villages all of them had Crimean Tatar names.

By erasing the Crimean Tatar names from a predominantly populated Crimean Tatar settlement Lugovoye, authorities are said to show disrespect (“spit in the face of the residents”, Extract 7) and further escalate the situation among ethnic groups in town. Like other indigenous languages, the indexical meanings entailed in Crimean Tatar names are vital for people’s wellbeing, as “the language carries particular significance for naming people and places, hence it has connections with past, present and future in the ontologies and cosmologies of marginalised and mobile people” (Heugh and Stroud 2018: 10). Nina shares her alternative knowledge about the practices, beliefs, and opinions of the locals, thus revealing yet again another order of (in)visibility underlining the street names signage (cf. Kerfoot and Hyltenstam 2017a). For Nina, the processes of naming and re-naming are salient since they presume a progressive invisibilisation of the Crimean Tatar history, of its past, and future. For her, to have proper Crimean Tatar names equals having the right to be in Crimea. Nina is
visibly moved by the degree of impudence with which the town’s decision makers, “the management”, forcefully reinscribe the Russian discourses into the present semiotic landscape. While agentively opposing this erasure in the interview, she performs an act of Linguistic Citizenship, condemning the falsification of her nation’s past.

5.6 Street names continuing the struggle

The desire for greater visibility of the Crimean Tatar language through geographic and street names becomes further evident during our walking tour:

**Extract 8: Nina’s walking tour**

Nina: here is another one (points to Cebbar Akim street name signage, Figure 7) (.) as I remember he is the poet (.) a poet or writer (.) but I don’t remember (.) clearly (2.0)

Natalia: and do you know who makes these signs ↑

Nina: I really don’t know but uh (.) it’s very (.) I’m proud of them cause it’s very hard uh::: to get uh::: >Crimean Tatar names< everywhere you want cause::: (.) >not just Crimean Tatar< but connected with Crimean Tatar (.) one of the::: streets (.) next streets (.) will be uh named after uh Сахаров (° translated from Russian as Sakharov °) (…) He was like uh (.) he made many efforts to like help Crimean Tatars and uh also he’s one who like uh helped to return ( it’s also ) (( we walk along the road and the cars pass by )) one of the famous historical (.) people ( I think it’s very uh) I am really proud of the::: of the citizens who made uh::: (( the street name sign ))

A renowned Soviet academic, Andrei Sakharov, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975 for his efforts as a prominent human rights defender, especially for the repressed people within the Soviet Union. He advocated for the return of forcibly deported Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Meskhetian Turks, Ingush, and other ethnic groups to their homelands, and he strongly condemned this repressive Soviet national policy (Sakharov 1990: 50, 115).

Nina’s sense of pride highlights that having a Crimean Tatar street name is something extraordinary and deserves appreciation. All participants are aware of the challenges in installing Crimean Tatar signs, which are not allowed everywhere. This reaffirms the significance of Aqmeçit and the Crimean Tatar position in Crimea, including its language and symbols, as something different from the perceived norm. Even decades after their return, Crimean Tatars face ongoing challenges in establishing themselves as the power center of the district, once again defining this space in terms of otherwise.

5.7 Place-names as inversions of the world

Considering the lack of visibility and symbolic power of the Crimean Tatar language and history in the district of Lugovoye (Extract 8), it is surprising that the name Aqmeçit has survived. Nina believes this is because the residents did not make any
arrangements with authorities before installing the sign. Otherwise, they might not have been allowed to give the Crimean Tatar micro-district “the original name of Simferopol” (Extract 9), so Nina.

Extract 9: Nina’s walking tour

The entrance to the district is marked with the city limit sign carrying the Crimean Tatar name Aqmeçıt (Figure 8). Aqmeçıt, so Nina, is the “original” name, not merely of the founded micro-district where we conducting our tour, but even of the whole territory known as “Simferopol” as the Crimean capital today. And arguably
Figure 8: City limit sign at the entrance to Aqmeçit. Photo by the author.
so. Nina interprets the choice of the district name as “ironic”, as it carries a message of implicit contestation. This should have been the historical Aqmeçıt as a Crimean Tatar power center, extending itself from the eighteenth century until today. This should have been the one and only Aqmeçıt (Figure 9), if not for the suppression of the Crimean Tatar legacy, the Crimean Tatar deportation, and their ongoing invisibilization.

Nina asserts an active stance against the suppression of Crimean Tatar history and the deliberate erasure of Crimean Tatar names from Crimea’s surface. She contends that the official history writing must be reversed. Rather than accepting her structural position within the normative social order, Nina places herself in an alternative social project that resists invisibilization of Crimean Tatar history and culture. In this context, Nina continues to inhabit a space of otherwise, where Aqmeçıt persists as the sole power centre, and the city limit sign adheres to her intersubjective assumptions (Povinelli 2011a: 7).

Nina’s interpretation is based on presuppositional meanings of Aqmeçıt leading to other indexical orders (Blommaert 2010: 41): first, Aqmeçıt known as the original name of Simferopol; second, the town that already existed in the past; third, as the place with a deep-rooted Crimean Tatar history. This order of visibility and legibility recalls the significant social standing of Crimean Tatars in Crimea prior to the first

![Figure 9: An alternative map.](image-url)
annexation of Crimea by Russia in 1773 and the era before Aqmeçit was renamed Simferopol and subsequently forgotten as a powerful Tatar cultural centre.

Apart from the Crimean Tatar name of the district displayed on the city limit sign, the Crimean Tatar flag (Figure 10), a conventionalised symbol representing the nation, appeared on the top of the sign along with the black-and-white sticker depicting the date of deportation “18 Mayis 1944 Biz Unitmadiq!” [18 May, 1944, We did not forget]. An explicit representation of the deportation is permeated with the semiotics of pain, as the numbers are pierced with the railroad leading to exile (Figure 11).

Taken together, this assemblage of signs can be seen as a materialised act of Linguistic Citizenship (Stroud and Kerfoot 2021: 17), in which historical invisibilities of the forcefully displaced Crimean Tatar ethnic group are foregrounded and even reclaimed through the recontextualization of place. Such performative acts subvert the official history writing or the dominant order of visibility. Nina’s narrated acts of Linguistic Citizenship lay bare the worlds that have historically been erased but not yet forgotten. Her narrative transcends and expands the limits of the present, facilitating the emergence of a new alternative world, a space of otherwise (Povinelli 2011b). Both the material artefacts, as performances of Linguistic Citizenship, and Nina’s renderings of them, resist the history of the place being overhauled by the past.

Figure 10: The Crimean Tatar flag on the top of the city limit sign. Photo by the author.
6 Discussion and concluding points

To construct spaces of otherwise means to exercise politics through acts of Linguistic Citizenship. By implication, in spaces of otherwise one deviates from the presumably “normal” or “official” by being different. Thus, the constructions of spaces of otherwise oftentimes require the acting against – against the purposeful erasure of language and people in the past, present, and future; against the hegemonic forms of being and speaking; against the normative understandings of what a place means, and, as shown with the Crimean Tatar history, against forgetting.

This paper aimed to bring to light the alternative social projects hidden beneath the everyday Crimean Tatar landscapes by using the audio-recordings and field data from interviews and a narrated walking tour led by three young women. A walking tour in a peripheral site in the proximity of today’s Simferopol revealed a rich history of dispossession and displacement. Amidst these historical disruptions, a Crimean Tatar space of otherwise emerged – a fragile social project where different voices claimed alternative forms of belonging.

The analysis of the tour illuminated how spaces of otherwise could be reframed as fragile semiotic landscapes. Car tyres and street names evoked nostalgia

Figure 11: The black-and-white sticker 18 Mayis 1944 Biz Unitmadiq! [18 May, 1944, We did not forget]. Photo by the author.
(Section 5.1), flags bore witness to past erasures (Section 5.2), and displaced bodies remembered histories of pain (Section 5.3). Despite a sense of out-of-placeness, young Crimean Tatar citizens actively re-sculpted their past, present, and future (Section 5.4). They opposed the invisibilization of their history through renaming geographic places and street names (Section 5.5 and 5.6) and reclaimed their visibility in Crimea through acts of Linguistic Citizenship (Section 5.7).

The study of semiotic landscapes together with the framework of Linguistic Citizenship provided insights into the evolving Crimean Tatar spaces of otherwise. By resisting to remain in the place of “non-place” and opposing dispossession (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 22), Crimean Tatars kept challenging the erasure of their history and presence, and laid the ground in refashioning their future. Car tyres, street names, place names, houses, flags, a city limit sign, and even people themselves constituted and geographically mapped the spaces of otherwise. As shown in the analysis, multimodal acts of Linguistic Citizenship – from using car tyres and geographic names as materialising histories of dispossession to claiming the space as one’s own through flags – resemiotised and reconstituted a Crimean Tatar space of otherwise in the semiotic landscape of Aqmeçit. As Linguistic Citizens, the individuals on the margins could position themselves as political agents and reclaim both their voice and visibility, while utilising their linguistic and semiotic resources performatively. Their acts allowed to see and grasp the everyday mundane spaces as alternative spaces, such which held wisdoms in reserve. The data analysis could show how different modalities, agents, modes, spaces, and times contributed to the emergence of locally situated meanings and worlds (cf. Povinelli 2011a; Kerfoot and Hyltenstam 2017b; Santos 2014). Such meanings as they were made visible by participants’ acts, and as brought out due to researcher’s unannounced visit, contributed to the dialogic production of ethnographic knowledge. Otherwise hidden knowledge could surface in specific localized conditions, as co-constructed by the research participants and the researcher involved into one web of transnational experience (Milani and Lazar 2017: 314).

The spaces of otherwise as spaces of memory, of personal and collective histories, inter-subjectively experienced and spatially co-constructed, are alternative spaces emerging out of opposition, which attempt to turn “other-ness” into “otherwise”. These spaces are experienced and sensed, they are both material and discursive. They are produced in sites, signage, settlements, revealed when stepping out, narrating, and strolling around. They are called into being and made alive by participants who simultaneously expand the present through temporalities of the past and future. Spaces of otherwise bear traces of past hardships, anticipating promising futures in the conditions of the unsettling present. Spaces of otherwise retain hope for not yet realized social projects, mediating between potentiality and risks.
Endnotes

Jefferson’s transcription conventions are adopted for the notation of audio-recorded speech:

( text ) unclear speech  
(hhh) audible exhalation  
Underline the speaker stressing the speech  
ALL CAPS increased volume speech  
>text< slowly delivered speech  
<text> faster delivered speech  
↑ rising pitch  
↓ falling pitch  
↑↑ very high pitch  
(( )) analyst’ comments and/or descriptions  
[ ] overlap of speech

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