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# ETHNOGRAPHIES OF ABSENCE IN CONTEMPORARY GEORGIA

## Introduction

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Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, the newly elected president of the Republic of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, declared the so-called transition in Georgia to be over. The term had come to signify the phase or process of leading the former Soviet republics from a planned economy, socialism, and authoritarianism to a market economy, democracy, and globalization. According to Saakashvili, this final goal had been achieved with the revolution: democracy had arrived, and with it prosperity. Eliminating signs of the transition period in the same way that signs of the Soviet period were eliminated after the demise of the USSR, Saakashvili sought to signal his country's new membership in the international community and to define Georgia as part of Europe.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, new things were achieved following the revolution: Georgia climbed international lists regarding government transparency, falling levels of corruption, and business investments. The Shevardnadze years, which were literally dark after the power grid ceased to function regularly, became a distant memory as infrastructure was rehabilitated. The economy improved, and, at least for some people, there were new chances to gain wealth.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, although political scientists and economists have explored socio-political changes in Georgia in terms of what has been gained in the years following the revolution, there has been little discussion of what has been lost in the wake of these achievements. What has gone missing since the Rose Revolution, or since the 2008 war with Russia? How do individuals and groups cope with and understand that which today has been rendered past, absent, or missing? What kinds of empty spaces exist—those in which people, signs, relationships, and meaningful objects used to be—and how do people make sense of these voids? Using anthropological perspectives, this special section examines what was lost in the politically proclaimed end of transition in Georgia and asks what could be gained by considering “lost in transition” not only experientially, as a sense of bewilderment, but concretely, in terms of

1. For examples of this, see Kristof Van Assche, Joseph Salukvadze, and Nick Shavishvili, eds., *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where Europe and Asia Meet* (Lewiston, N.Y., 2009), and Martin Demant Frederiksen, *Young Men, Time, and Boredom in the Republic of Georgia* (Philadelphia, 2013).

2. Rick Fawn, ed., *Georgia: Revolution and War* (London, 2013), Kelli Hash-Gonzalez, *Popular Mobilization and Empowerment in Georgia's Rose Revolution* (Lanham, Md., 2012), Gabriel C. Monson, ed., *Georgia after the Rose Revolution* (New York, 2009).

objects, habits, and relationships that have been lost, destroyed, abandoned, or eradicated.<sup>3</sup>

Rapid social change is often conceptualized in terms of dramatic destruction and alteration. Walter Benjamin's writing about Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* as a metaphorical "angel of history" propelled "into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward," is an oft-cited representation of the notion of progress.<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, of course, theorized that rapid and devastating destruction was a necessary part of capitalism, which must always seek to rearrange the social order and devalue existing capital in order to justify the production and consumption of new products. The notion that capitalism itself demands destruction and change was picked up and given a positive valence by Joseph Schumpeter, who declared *creative destruction* an engine of capitalist development and innovation. These notions have been amply represented in scholarship on the postsocialist transition, which has often aimed at showing the negative social consequences of the move toward market democracy. This literature has also focused extensively on *nostalgia*, seeing the disconnected fragments of state socialism as leftovers hearkening back to another social world and a standpoint from which to critique the one that has emerged over the past twenty-five years.

The papers in this special section certainly pick up on the themes of capitalist destruction, nostalgia for the state socialist period, and the general sense of confusion and unease that has characterized much of the postsocialist era. Whether they have been taken away by force in the pursuit of geopolitical power, swept away in the interests of building new spaces of capitalist production or consumption, or simply unintentionally allowed to disintegrate, absent things leave voids that are often the constant subjects of attention and discussion in Georgia. From breakaway provinces to homes destroyed in war, from statues to jars of fruit, from long-lapsed sexualities to personal biographies, all of these absent things have looming presences that shape present-day Georgian society.

However, the papers here do not focus just on what is lost. They take a careful and critical look at the social uses and effects of absence itself. Not just accounts of the people, practices, institutions, monuments, sentiments, and places that have gone missing, they are, more importantly, examinations of how and why parts of the social world are obliterated, expelled, silenced, neglected, or dismantled during times of dramatic social upheaval. How and why does the Georgian state's reliance on international donors leave vulnerable people missing their possessions, their occupations, and their former selves? How do international NGOs use the idea of resolving social problems in the future to make them conceptually absent in the present? In what ways do invocations of now-missing sexual practices shape the erotic imaginations

3. Cf. Kristen Ghodsee, *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism* (Durham, 2011), Morten Axel Pedersen and Lars Højer, "Lost in Transition: Fuzzy Property and Leaky Selves in Ulaanbaatar," *Ethnos* 73, no. 1 (March 2008): 73–96.

4. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London, 1999), 249.

of contemporary Georgians? How do people use the absence of a historical figure—Iosif Stalin himself—to understand their own poverty and marginalization? These are all questions that ask how transforming the social world depends in fundamental ways on the process of making things go missing and indexing their very absence; on taking things away and then pointing to the holes marking where they used to be.

Although notions of *absence* or *void* seem inherently spatial, the contributions to this thematic section show how they are fundamentally also problems of temporality. The leaps and voids created in either invoking or dismantling various parts of the past create not just simple past, present, and future but also tense and complicated forms of time: past perfects, past imperfects, future anteriors, and present progressives—all of which are enacted not only at the level of the state and its propaganda but also materially and symbolically in everyday experience. This concern with temporality is immediately evident in political concerns about images of the Soviet past, most notably the image of the Georgian-born Stalin, as described in Katrine Bendtsen Gotfredsen's article on nostalgia. Here we see how it is not only communist ideology and Soviet versions of history that are being rendered void by the government but also the personal pasts of individuals who see their social statuses, memories, and dreams caught up in and rendered marginal by the political redefinitions and even renouncement of certain historical and ideological times and spaces. It is also evident in Paul Manning's article dealing with a more distant, romanticized and eroticized, national past, in which sex was "present but absent," and these sexual practices' relation to present-day discussions about the absence of particular kinds of romantic relationships; these conversations in turn come to animate discussions about what does and does not have a place in modern Georgia. The gaps and absences existing in contemporary re-presentations of sexual alterity become an arena of potentiality, imagination, and desire alike but also one of contestation and ambiguity about what rightfully belongs to the past and what rightfully belongs to the present. Temporality is also evident, in a more concealed way, in the future anteriors invoked in the reform processes initiated by Saakashvili in the early years of his presidency, as Martin Demant Frederiksen shows. Even though it never seems to actually show up, "that which will have been" when the government finally lives up to its promises has a real and palpable presence in the political and social lives of impoverished and unemployed Georgians and also in the lives of the local NGO workers seeking to confront and improve contemporary social issues. *Pre-traumatic stress* becomes a notion for the NGO workers not only to describe the uncertainties of the future faced by those with whom they work but also the uncertainty they themselves experience. Likewise, the future anterior shows up in the internally displaced people (IDP) settlements, described by Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, in which people who were ethnically cleansed during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war are left mired in the static present of the camps while continually being asked to imagine that which will have been when the state and international aid agencies enact their continually postponed visions of social reintegration and rebuilding. While the government and international aid agencies both plan and act in the swiftly flowing time of crisis, the ordinary Georgians who are

their beneficiaries are often left in the chronic present, simply “existing,” as they say, rather than living or making plans for the future.

Although the four ethnographies of Georgia presented in this issue are rooted in a particular time and place, the rapidity and magnitude of the changes in Georgia bring up questions about the ways in which the wider post-Soviet region is shaped by the absent. Throughout the postsocialist world, things that are missing shape discussions about not only the past but also future politics, the cost of social change, and the fates of those left out of economic transformation. Ways of thinking about things that aren't there are key to understanding the effects of large-scale social transformations in their most intimate aspects. Indeed, the problematic nature of absence is now perhaps the defining feature of the region, even more than the shared experience of state socialism.

Theorizing these absences matters, because it allows for the creation of concepts that can travel out of their contexts of origin to inform other places that are also shaped—perhaps in similar ways—by the presence of absence. Here, the four articles in this section provide a wealth of theories and concepts. Absence has been conceived as a phantom pain of the social realm created by the loss of a material substance or a physical being.<sup>5</sup> As Dunn, Frederiksen, and Gotfredsen all show, dramatic social change can result in the disappearance of entire groups who have been pushed out of the public sphere, such as the elderly, the displaced, or the unemployed. Practices, too, can become markedly absent when they are pushed out of the present or rendered invalid and dangerous, as Manning describes in his history of sexual life in Georgia.

More critically, though, these four anthropologists also contend that absence is created not just by eliminating people, things, or symbols but also by rupturing the relations between them. Gaps in networks of meaning can create voids, leaving signifiers with nothing to signify, or things needing signification without any signifiers to point to them. In some cases, as Dunn shows, absences are created when things no longer refer to themselves but can only point to that which is gone. This means that the very fact that something is no longer there is constantly played up, leading to pervasive sentiments of loss, grief, nostalgia, and longing. In other cases, as Frederiksen and Gotfredsen both show, it is language itself that is absent, leaving people without the means to address either past or future or to conceptualize what they have lost or how to get it back.

Astoundingly, the Saakashvili era has been profoundly marked by the absence of Saakashvili himself, who became the first Georgian leader to step down voluntarily after losing a democratic election. Forced to flee the country in order to avoid being arrested (as Yulia Tymoshenko was in Ukraine, or as

5. On this phantom pain, see Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen, eds., *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss* (New York, 2010). On material or physical loss, see Frederiksen, *Young Men, Time, and Boredom*, Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, 2008), and Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago, 1995).

Saakashvili's own minister of the interior, Vano Merabishvili, was soon after the 2012 elections), Saakashvili has gone into exile somewhere in Europe. "It's huge, huge," he has said, claiming his own disappearance from office as the seal that certifies the permanence of Georgian democracy.<sup>6</sup> "When you have radical reform, you know someone will come and try and repeal that reform," he said. "It's a cycle. But I don't think they can take it back. This region is drifting toward the West regardless of the governments."<sup>7</sup> Yet, vanishing along with Saakashvili are many of the values, terms, signs, and practices of his decade in office. How these absences will shape Georgia in the future—both geopolitically and on the scale of daily life—is an open question.

Taken together, though, these articles offer a sound basis from which to launch an investigation of Georgia after Saakashvili. They provide not only an ethnographic basis from which to understand an understudied place but also new and important ways of assessing transformations in the region that go beyond a postsocialist lens. By studying what isn't there—and why it has disappeared, who has made it disappear, and what that disappearance animates—these anthropological accounts offer alternative renderings of political and social change that offer new ways to study rapidly and repeatedly transforming places.

6. Quoted in David M. Herszenhorn, "Exiting President Reflects on Georgia," *New York Times*, 18 November 2013, at [www.nytimes.com/2013/11/18/world/europe/georgia-president-takes-office.html?smid=pl-share](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/18/world/europe/georgia-president-takes-office.html?smid=pl-share) (last accessed 5 February 2014).

7. Quoted in Jackson Diehl, "Georgia's Westward Course," *Washington Post*, 24 November 2013, at [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jackson-diehl-georgias-westward-course/2013/11/24/52a89ef0-5437-11e3-9e2c-eld01116fd98\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jackson-diehl-georgias-westward-course/2013/11/24/52a89ef0-5437-11e3-9e2c-eld01116fd98_story.html) (last accessed 5 February 2014).