Considering the role of presence and absence in space constructions: ethnography as methodology in human geography

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Considering the Role of Presence and Absence in Space Constructions. Ethnography as Methodology in Human Geography

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Abstract: *»Die Rolle von Absenz und Präsenz in Raumkonstruktionen. Zu den Möglichkeiten der Ethnographie als Methodologie in der Humangeographie«.* In this article, we discuss methodological issues and problems in researching relational space. We argue that despite all innovations after recent spatial turns, research on space is often still marked by what we call 'presentism' and 'concretism'. Instead, we seek to show how spatial encounters today are more and more marked and shaped by different absences. Using some insights from the poststructuralist take on assemblages we argue that any spatial method to understand spatial complexity is incomplete if the role of absences in shaping spatial presences and spatial encounters is left unconsidered. Addressing questions of methodology and methods we vote for the ethnographic approach which, to us, has the strongest potential to undertake spatial research sensitive to the problem of present absences, i.e. that the complexity of places is often shaped by absent spatial events.

Keywords: Ethnography, absence/presence, assemblage, relational space, methodology, constructivism.

1. Introduction

'*Space*' has become a major buzzword in the social sciences and humanities during the last twenty years. A plethora of *spatial turns* in different disciplines is at work which makes it hard to acquire a firm overview of the field and to give a valid answer to the question *how* space is exactly understood in each of these turns. However, and despite all differences, we argue that most of the turns (turns towards place, networks, or practice) seem to converge in their emphasis of materiality to social life. Some of these turns even go so far as to

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reintroduce the ideas of presentism and concretism to counterbalance the uni-lateral emphasis on texts and discourses obvious in the advent of postmodern science. Such a conceptualisation of space bases on two assumed *truisms*:

1) The first truism, the truism of concretism, is to regard space as a repository of concrete and material objects relying on a particular Dingschema (for further explanations, see section 3). Such a truism highlights the importance of researching the material and concrete dimension of places and other spatial encounters. This perspective also facilitates the description and ordering of material objects by distinguishing between here and there, near and far.

2) A second truism, the truism of presentism, substantiates the first in stating that the relation between objects is more intensive the nearer the objects are to each other. This constitutes the First Law of Geography as proclaimed by Waldo Tobler (see Tobler 1970): With increasing kilometrical distance, relations faint. In this sense, presentism ensures a fuller understanding of what is going on at a particular place.

To us, both assumptions constitute a particular spatial imagination deployed as a technique or tool within everyday life but also in politics, economics and even science. In this article, we try to *challenge from a geographical point of view this spatial imagination of concretism and presentism and scrutinise its associated spatial methodology*. We point to the *importance of absence* to grasp more adequately the relational ontology of spatial encounters. To sustain and organise our arguments, we draw on assemblage theories to approach the methodological problem of absence and presence. We continue with an exemplification of our conceptual arguments by turning to the relationship of absence/presence and the practice of distinguishing urban spaces from rural ones. We will follow by suggesting that *ethnography* seems to be the adequate method(ology) to tackle the introduced theoretical problems and exemplify these methodical implications with the introduction of a research example. Hereby, we follow the logic that any methods that try to grasp and stimulate research on the spatiality of the social should start from the premise that empirically determined spatial constellations are indissolubly connected with social practices (or, as it is often called, socio-spatial dialectics; Soja 1980). The openness and inchoateness of the ethnographical approach makes it compatible to the messiness, contingency and fluidity of the spatial and the serendipity of spatial encounters in the context of different absences and presences.

2.   Thinking about Assemblage and Space or: Every Assemblage has its Place(s)

The basic ideas of the assemblage concept were elaborated by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 1987).

The essential aspect of their work on '*assemblage*' (or original: '*agencement*') theory was to provide a new approach to social ontology (DeLanda 2006a, 1) beyond rather traditional conceptualisations dealing with ontological issues of *micro/macro*, *individual/society*, or *agency/structure* dichotomies, highlighting instead the significance of the exteriority of relations (DeLanda 2006b, 253).[1] This refers predominantly to the question of how assemblages as heterogeneous associations are in a state of spatial becoming and reshaping, and how distinctive assemblages interrelate to each other without giving an ontological priority to certain micro or macro issues. Theodore Schatzki (2002, xiii) has summarized a "common figure" that emerges from assemblage theorists to see assemblages as "social things organised in configurations, where they hang together, determine one another via their connections, as combined both exert effects on other configurations of things and are transformed through the action of other configurations, and therewith constitute the setting and medium of human action, interaction, and coexistence". For example, the rural can be seen as such a heterogeneous association which is, through different political interventions, different images of the rural or different material landscapes at work, permanently in such a state of becoming. Another possibility is to think of social movements as such an assembled entity, where the trajectories, political claims and identities depend on a coming together and collaboration of heterogeneous configurations and processes.

In contemporary geographical scholarship *assemblage thinking* is increasingly used across the discipline (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 124). The interest of geographers in assemblage theory is not surprising. The way of seeing 'the social' as a relational and fluid composition of heterogeneous (human and non-human) elements enables geographers to think of spatial formations beyond any fixed notion. This marks a crucial commonality within the current heterogeneity of conceptual and theoretical roots to assemblage: Research that uses assemblage as an analytical instrument interprets *socio-spatial phenomena as a product of relations*.

Within the broader context of poststructuralist thoughts to the conceptualisation of space and place, this also has some fundamental consequences to the interpretation of the relation between absence and presence. Such an orientation is sceptical of "presentistical" approaches while reflecting upon the extensions of assemblages in time and space and the role of what we call present absences (for further explanation, see below). Consequently, in relation to our focus on implications of absence and presence in assemblage theory, the essential issue is a needed reflection of space-constituting categories like *near/far* or *distance*: "When relationships are understood topologically, presence and absence are reconfigured so that the distance between 'here and there' or between

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[1] See e.g. DeLanda 2006a, Deleuze and Guattari 1986 for further detailed information.

'the local and the global' is not anything that can be measured in miles and kilometres" (Allen 2011, 156). Therefore, we will now turn explicitly to this methodological question of thinking about absence and presence and its role for understanding spatiality – an issue still somewhat underdeveloped in recent discussions on assemblages.

3.   Absence/Presence and Urban/Rural

> I considered that even in the human languages there is no proposition that
> does not imply the entire universe: to say 'the tiger' is to say the tigers that
> begot it, the deer and turtles devoured by it, the grass on which the deer fed,
> the earth that was mother to the grass, the heaven that gave birth to the earth
> (Borges 2000, 91).

Common spatial observations which are centred upon the *idea of observable activities executed by a corporeal subject* are often in a position of simplifying the complexity of the social and its corresponding spatiality due to particular spatial truisms: that which is here and hence near to the actor is *present* and *empirically real*; that which is there and hence far from the actor is *absent* and *empirically virtual*. *Space* understood in these terms rely on a threefold premise:

1) An *Euclidian topographical understanding of space* and on the management of the space-related distinctions here/there and near/far in the sense of the First Law of Geography: "Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things" (Tobler 1970, 236).
2) *Objects which are near or in proximity to an actor* are labelled as real and authentic by its being '*here*'. At the same time these objects express the familiar and/or the controllable, hence expressing certainty and security.
3) They also rely on a particular *Dingschema* as expressed in the focus of the corporeal co-presence of bodily human beings in interaction.

These truisms play an important role not least because the presence of the body also indicates realness and authenticity. Anthony Giddens, for example, defines *presence* as the presence of the body while *absence* is defined as the spatial-temporal distance of corresponding bodies (Giddens 1984, 37): "The social characteristics of co-presence are anchored in the spatiality of the body, in orientation to others and to the experiencing self" (ibid., 64). But is such a corporeal distinction of presence and absence as separated entities still valid today, especially in the context of the growing relevance of assemblages in our daily lives?

To begin with: The quote above by Jorge Luis Borges points to circumstances and contexts which are quite different from this corporeal understanding of absence and presence. Borges argues that the pronunciation of the word '*tiger*' does not only make the image of the tiger present but at the same time other things and objects that share a relation with the tiger are evoked. Alt-

hough they are not pronounced, they nevertheless share a particular relation with *tiger*: tigers which beget this particular tiger; animals which it has eaten; the particular region that serves as its habitat. In this case, absence and presence are not distinguished as exclusive entities that are separated by a strict boundary but as inherently connected: they blur into each other.

For geographers, this raises at least one question: Is it possible to think of co-presence even if bodies are far away from each other – and what kind of spatiality is needed if measuring far/near or here/there by (kilo)metrical distance fails (see Allen 2011, 156)? What Borges' example shows is how to free the distinction between absence and presence from its confining reference to any Dingschema. If we drop this Dingschema, than the uncertainty and the irreducible difficulty to firmly distinguish between presence and absence becomes more visible. Hence, we are in a need of a new understanding of the relation between the social and space; an understanding that discards our common spatial truisms as a version of the social in which "space is exclusive. Neat divisions, no overlap. Here and there, each place is located at one side of a boundary. It is thus that an 'inside' and an 'outside' are created. What is similar is close. What is different, is elsewhere" (Mol and Law 1994, 647).

Borges' emphasises that the distinction absence/presence permanently collapses. Indeed, both sides begin to interfere with each other and start to form a complex relationship. Hence, a second (and other) way of interpreting this distinction emphasises much more the mutual dependency (*gegenseitige Stützung*) between absence and presence. This is a trivial insight: *that people can be present at a particular place and hence in proximity to each other requires the absence of other objects (and people) at the same time*. In social geography, this is a well-known issue, discussed by Torsten Hägerstrand (1973, 71ff) under the label "*the packing problem*": "As soon as one object is put to a location, the space it occupies is not available for a host of other 'weaker' objects and the probability field of their location has changed" (ibid.). Some recent social theories, especially those clinging to the paradigm of complexity, have turned with new vigour to the insight that presence is only possible because there are many other things and objects absent at the very same time. For example, to meet with friends in the relaxed atmosphere of an urban park environment requires the absence of a lot of objects that nevertheless are deeply entwined with urbanity: traffic, noise, industry, crowding and so on. These present absences, we argue, are quite often treated as some residual realm where they usually escape our attention and get lost.

Stepping back to the "packing-problem" mentioned above, it becomes clear that the density of people, goods and services, often signifying 'urbanity' (see Sieverts 2008, 32ff), is only possible through the absence of extensive farming practices and wide open spaces within the city. In particular, the absence of these particular features, commonly designated as rural, is producing the kind of urbanity we love or hate today. Consequently, this allows us to generalise

that the presence of an object or a particular configuration of several objects, like urbanity, is only possible by the absence of other objects – those that do constitute something other compared with urbanity. The more, we have to acknowledge that the presence and absence of objects is produced by particular social practices and political and economic decisions on the 'appropriate' land use to keep other objects and activities absent at the same time: for example, extensive agriculture, huge distances, open spaces and so on; features that we are used to regard as exclusively rural. In other words: The *rural*, then, is in its absence part of the production of urban features and urbanity as a particular way of life (Wirth 1938), at least in the way we, in the Western hemisphere, are used to imagine it.

This also works the other way round: No one seriously doubts that agricultural products (like meat, wheat, fruits and vegetables) are a necessary condition for the reproduction of today's urban citizens. Does that not mean that the absent agriculture is at the same time present through its products that are consumed by the urban dweller on a regular basis? In this case, practices of urban consumption are always practices that make the rural present; hence the rural is always present-absent. Although being separated by different spaces and by the principle of bivalence, urban consumers and rural agriculture are connected through practices of consuming, to name just this one example. Accepting these neglected and often invisible relations between urban and rural spaces, we can directly postulate a connection between the absent and the present: *If we speak of present objects and processes it is useful to keep in mind that these particular present objects and processes are not to a greater extent important or real than those objects which are absent in a concrete spatial-temporal setting*. Only by the condition of the absence of other objects it is possible for some objects to be in the place where space sensitive observers find them present and, as an important geographical technique, mappable (see Callon and Law 2004). In turn, we should notice the firm and tight relation between absence and presence. This relation in a sense saps the exclusivity and the independent existence of both sides of the distinction by pointing to the condition of co-constitution and to the reciprocal entanglement of both sides. The absent is not only 'there', it is always 'here', hence each thinking of that which is present must keep in mind the multiple absences which allow for something to be present and to be in its place; this is why we speak of present absences (see for similar arguments Massey 2004, 10). If we talk about present objects and processes it seems necessary to keep in mind that these presences are connected with the ones we regard as being absent in a given and specific situation (Law and Mol 2001; Callon and Law 2004).

Starting from such observations, Annemarie Mol and John Law have voted for a new thought style that has implications for applying spatial methods:

Instead, we might simply … [think] about the dependence of that which cannot be made present – that which is absent – on that which is indeed present.

> Or, as the poststructuralist literatures sometimes put it, the way in which the authority of presence depends on the alterity of Otherness […] (Law and Mol 2001, 615f). The constancy of object presence depends on simultaneous absence or alterity (ibid., 616).

Chunglin Kwa (2002) has labelled such an understanding, one which is interested in tiny and invisible connections between objects, as the '*baroque understanding of complexity*' (see also Law 2006). From this perspective, one should 'look down' at the detailed practices of social life and undertake an ethnographic endeavour. Once this perspective is adapted, it is possible, Kwa argues, to become surprised by the various associations and connections (i.e. assemblages) that exist alongside established distinctions like *urban/rural*. If we accept the viewpoint that social life and all social practices are indeed a relational process of making and blurring distinctions constituting heterogeneous associations, we can approach some spatial distinction as two separated sides that are nevertheless connected to each other. It is here where criticising spatial distinctions which locate objects and processes as either absent or present contributes to applying the concept of assemblage in geography. However, it is worth noting that in everyday life an observer always can use the distinction *absence/presence*, like any other distinction, in a way to indicate objects and locate them either on the absence-side or, respectively, on the presence-side and treat them as if they are existing out of themselves. But for us, this is an inadequate view to approach the complexity of space because it reduces the complexity of the space-society-nexus by cutting off the relation between entities and objects and putting them in their 'proper' spaces and places (see Belina 2013). Such an understanding avoids acknowledging the growing importance of assemblages and of present absences in our lives.

On the other hand, by promoting and using 'other' spatial topologies that emphasise and underpin the relational and fluid character of the contemporary social (see Law and Mol 2001), we gain insights into the assembling process where objects and processes take place and which relations they share, i.e. which objects and processes are made present and which are made absent within social interaction and social practices (see Massey 2004). In order to make use of these rather theoretical thoughts on the relationship of spatial absences and presences we use the term "present absence(s)". Therewith, we point to absent material issues and conditions as well as to absent processes that take influence on, constitute and/or shape spatial presences. How this proposition can be investigated and how it is already incorporated and used as an argument within social movements is shown in the following three sections which deal with the problem to find proper methods to research the spatial nexus of absence and presence. First, we will argue that ethnography is an adequate methodological framework to research absence/presence before coming to detailed methodical exemplifications by drawing on own research. We will close our argument by turning to the so-called '*War on Drugs*' in Mexico to show how

geographies of resistance are influenced by the constructed spatiality of present-absent relations.

4.   Ethnography as Method(ology)

The term '*ethnography*' gains increasing attention in contemporary human geography. The notion appears not exclusively in recent publications throughout various sub disciplines (see Müller 2012; Watson and Till 2010, 122-5) but is progressively introduced in student textbooks (see e.g. DeLyser et al. 2010; Reuber and Pfaffenbach 2005). In order to further elaborate our main argument (ethnography as the adequate method(ology) for investigating absence/presence), we follow the ideas of the recently initiated debate about the potential of interpreting ethnography as methodology (see especially Müller 2012; Verne 2012a, 2012b). This discussion draws on the strength of an ethnographic research design that transcends the *mere* methodical implications. Therefore, we will briefly discuss some crucial points regarding the interrelations of ethnography, geography and methodology.

Why the interest in ethnography from a geographical point of view? It is not the "range of methods and time-intensive techniques" (Watson and Till 2010, 122), including participant observation, field notes and documents or informal interviews – to name but a few. Rather, it is the general '*muse*' of ethnography, as Verne (2012b, 186f) puts it, and the specific epistemology in encountering the complexity of the social world. The 'holistic view' (see Verne 2012b, 186ff.), gained through the continuously, critically scrutinising of the collected data and the insights of long-term participation in daily life worlds, goes beyond discourses and is able to grasp complex power/knowledge relationships behind always contextualized attributions of meaning and agency (Verne 2012a, 37ff.).

The rising attention to ethnography has to be linked to the ability of ethnographic scholarship to research various kinds of social practices, performances or lived practices. Yet, beside these rather empirical reasons, there is another crucial issue that is implicit in an ethnographic methodology: its relationship to theory. Ethnographic fieldwork as methodology interprets theory as a specific form of prevention. Certain research hypotheses derived from theoretical assumptions are seen as always containing a constricted view onto the social world that hinders the researcher to be open for unexpected empirical eventualities, for the importance of 'little things' and how spatial absences shape the form of spatial presences. With its focus on micro-sociological elements, the significance of eventualities in social (and spatial) formations or an emphasis on emergence, provisionary and multiplicities, some of our theoretical concerns on doing spatial research might be remediated by turning to ethnographic methodology. The ethnographic scholar fully engages with its research subjects and concentrates on the empirical complexity of social life before reflecting the

observations with existing theoretical debates and concepts. Then, considering assemblage or relational spatialities, these spaces must be seen as "*outcomes* of those activities and processes, to which they in turn contribute" (Marston et al. 2009, 665). As already mentioned, spaces are no precedent structures, neither in the sense of precedence nor in that of structure. Rather, spaces have to be understood poststructurally and are "labile phenomena, only transitory fixations of which can be assured" (Schatzki 2002, 24). For example, insights from the ethnographic approach towards researching the geographies of social movements point to a critical interpretation of any attempt to prioritise one spatiality over another or space over the social. Although this argument is merely implicit in some publications of the current theoretical debate (Leitner et al. 2008; McFarlane 2009), there is still a failure to explicitly combine the strength of an ethnographic research method(ology) to approaches of geographies of social movements. As we will show below, ethnographic encounters can reveal how distinctive spatialities are co-implicit and interconnected in protest practices.

Exactly at this point, the potential of '*ethnography as methodology*' in the context of assemblage theory, relational space and the geography of absence/presence is obvious. But how can the problem of spatial absence/presence be investigated from a methodical point of view?

5. Grasping Absence/Presence using Ethnography

With a special focus on the role of present absences in spatial formations the highly complex relationship of absence/presence in space constructions becomes visible by applying ethnographic methods. To further investigate the relationship between absence and presence we introduce a mere analytical distinction between rather "*obvious*" and rather "*hidden*" issues of present absences in order to be able to investigate the role of present absences in a more detailed way.

First of all, what we name the rather "*obvious*" issues in present absences are probably best identifiable by an analysis of textual representations of the specific research issue. By analysing for example media coverage, scientific publications or – in case – documents of the research object itself through (ethnographic) hermeneutic methods (Geertz 1973) or discourse analysis (Keller 2005) the investigator gains first indications of different absences that are constitutive for spatial presences. In order to grasp the relevant (absent) space constitutive aspects, a focus should be laid on elements that are elsewhere often referred and conceptualised as 'context' (Grossberg 2006). Context hereby refers to the multidimensional conditions, processes and articulations of present moments (and spaces) that are e.g. rooted in history, norms, or traditions and consequently inevitably materially absent. As an example serves the role of spatially ab-

sent dead and disappeared bodies in the context of the geographies of resistance in the '*War on Drugs*'. A view in the medially transmitted causes of the emerging protests reveals a relation of protest practices and the rising amount of dead and disappeared people in Mexico (Scholl 2012). Therefore, protest activity and the physical constitution of protest places can be considered as being intertwined and influenced by those absences and the related processes.

Yet, by emphasising solely such representational aspects researchers would produce only a one-sided analysis of the absent/present relationship that excludes all elements that we call '*hidden*' issues of present absences. Applying an ethnographic methodology eschews this often stated critique of 'representational investigations' by explicitly giving voice to unanticipated, antagonistic, and affective – or more generalised '*hidden*' – dimensions of absences. Hereby, a methodical extension beyond an analysis of texts is crucial to identify the heterogeneity of distinctive individual productions of meaning that lie beyond the representational sphere. Highlighting these processes of distinctive meaning-(re-)constructions through taking serious different and often marginalized voices avoids simultaneously a construction of an artificial unity across difference in spatial relations (see Wolford 2010). The researcher is forced to move beyond the obvious relations and representations of absences within the research context to grasp in more detail the multi-dimensionality of interconnected and entangled artefacts, processes and subjects of present space(s). This is reached through an alignment of representational findings with further research data. For example, by conducting formal and/or informal interviews, long-term participant observations and 'just' passing everyday life with persons concerning the research topic, the investigator receives valuable insights into differentiated and heterogeneous interpretations and the diversity of the constitution of produced meanings beyond representations. For example, a mix of participant observation, informal discussions and textual analysis allows the researcher to recapitulate specific meaning productions and/or spatial constitutions in a deeper way. Here, especially the long-term field presence is a key feature in the context of an ethnographic investigation into absence/presence. It allows the researcher to trace many different indications about the significance of present absences due to the range of moments of possibility of interrogations and the flexibility of using spontaneous methods. The investigator gets the chance to be aware of the significance of seemingly marginal information – that – in turn reveals important features for a better and more profound understanding of spatialities.

At this point, the importance and the value of ethnographic research methodology and methods are visible once more. While sometimes ethnography is attributed with messiness, disorder and/or indifference, the case of absence/presence points in turn to the ability of ethnographic research methods for contextualising seemingly heterogeneous and messy socio-spatial relations. The unique epistemological implications, especially those of methodical open-

ness and time-intensive fieldwork, open a path to be aware of the importance and influence of hidden issues in space constructions. Every application of a single method or a mere and strict combination of several ones falls short of such valuable potential. Instead, an ethnographic methodology allows the researcher to confront with both sides of the complex, heterogeneous, and entangled characteristics of present absences.

In the following section we highlight the above discussed methodological and methodical issues of researching present absences by introducing a research example about the geographies of resistance in the context of the so-called '*War on Drugs*' in Mexico and beyond. The results are the sum of an ethnographic engagement with activists in Mexico between February and April 2012, mainly in Mexico City and Cuernavaca (Scholl 2012).

6. Geographies of Resistance and the Role of Absence/Presence in the '*War on Drugs*'

The social movement '*Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity*' (MPJD) emerged as civil society force in the context of the so-called '*War on Drugs*' and the interrelated increasing violence in Mexico. The main goal of activists is to put an end to the politics of war in Mexico and beyond. In the next section follows a short review of the MPJDs activities. This review serves as a starting point for detailed considerations regarding the value of an investigation into the role of present absences in the practices of the social movement.

The different modes of protest activities range from more 'traditional' tactics like public speeches or protest marches to meetings with politicians and so-called '*caravans*' – several week long journeys through certain regions with protest practices in each visited place during the *caravan*. A more detailed view on these activities reveals a heterogeneous 'coming together' of distinctive protesters instead of a discursively induced homogeneous 'victim movement' as often occurring in media contributions. Besides the victims[2] of war politics, the MPJD is also constituted by students who are – broadly spoken – worried about Mexico's future, human rights activists, scientists, lawyers, workers, unemployed, journalists or spontaneous and part-time participants – to name but a few. This heterogeneous composition of distinctive protesters gets more concrete by considering the implications of the complex socio-political context that motivates protesters to their participation in movement activities. The *main* political claims and arguments expressed by activists during protest events have to be interpreted as a result of a complex collective process that is influ-

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[2] The term 'victim' connotes relatives or friends of *direct* victims (e.g. dead or disappeared people). They denominated themselves as 'victims'. The article follows this logic.

enced by the differently experienced heterogeneity of activists' everyday life, discussions among protesters, personal relations and/or eventualities – issues that are inscribed in the consensus of ideas and claims presented by MPJD. Following the activists' logic, the war-strategy against the increasing power of drug cartels lead to brutal and arbitrary police, military and marine interventions, sometimes based on mere suspicion. Simultaneously, due to corruption of state institutions and the translocal relations and logics of drug production and consumption, an effective combat of organized crime cells through militarisation is *impossible*. In order to challenge and sensitise for this *impossibility*, activists draw on a specific 'concept', which they denominate as '*national emergency*'. Under this umbrella, activists analyse distinctive state policies ranging from security politics, neoliberal economic policy measures to educational politics, migration politics and consequences of impunity and corruption. In their view all issues influence the above mentioned impossibility of a successful militarisation.

This compositional heterogeneity can still be expanded by addressing the spatial dimension of the MPJD. The topological spaces of the MPJD bind together diverse elements (e.g. different actor groups like NGOs, political institutions, and journalists) across space. Hereby, the observable relational construction of their "movement space" of spatially distributed and heterogeneous elements is indispensable in order to gain the necessary public attention and distribution of the political claims (see Murdoch 2006, 89-101). Therefore, what is interpreted as 'near' is especially constituted through social and political relational proximity. The (always provisional) movement spatialities are in this sense "relationally constituted by assemblages that pull certain places into proximity while pushing others into the distance (with distance conceptualized as relations between the aligned elements)" (Murdoch 2006, 93). In such a view, the movement space is 'nothing more' than the product of binding together distant but *thematically* 'near' elements, whereby transcending boundaries (of regions, nations, etc.) is likely possible, for example due to communication technology. In order to construct their movement space, especially the caravans reveal a crucial significance in order to grasp the movements' topological space and spatial trajectories. So far, the MPJD organized *caravans* to the northern part of Mexico, to the southern part of Mexico, and across the United States.

Activists sensitised the public with the main political claims and goals of the movement and simultaneously extended the movement space through connecting formerly independent activists groups. Besides the formal events activists were able to build new connections due to an exchange of information, know-how and/or compatible imaginations about the socio-political context. These processes of the caravans encompass exactly what McFarlane (2009, 562) and Anderson and McFarlane (2011, 125) depict as inter-relating sets of processes

where present absences unavoidably guide this binding together of different actors.

Figure 1: Caravans of the Social Movement MPJD
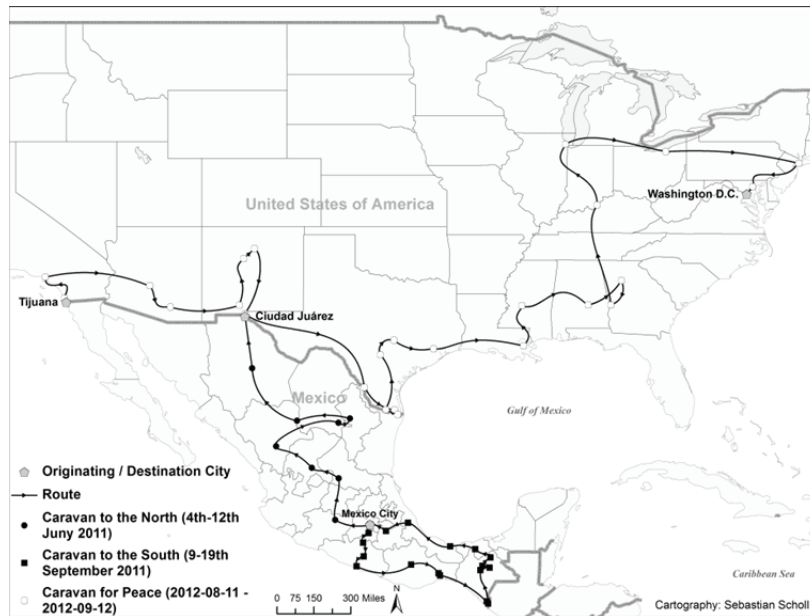
Having all this in mind, the important role of present absences in this dynamic constitution of the movement spatiality has to be further elaborated. Here, it is useful to consider the role of dead and disappeared people to the making of concrete protest activities.

One of the main motivations of activists to do protests and to reach their political claims is a visualisation of the increasing numbers of supposed innocent dead and disappeared people and the threaded suffering of relatives and friends. In recent times, the rising amount of such direct victims encourages more and more relatives, friends and wider civil society to engage publicly due to the exorbitant extent and quantity of missing people. This *obvious* role of absences in protest place constitution is easily identifiable – as mentioned above – not only through interviewing activists but also through discourse analysis or hermeneutic textual analysis of movements' publications. Yet, for a deeper and fuller understanding of the spatial constitution of protest activities, a consideration of rather *hidden* aspects and their relation to this obvious role of absences is indispensable.

A focus on wider protest materialities serve here as an exemplification for the significances of *hidden* issues of present absences in protest activities.

Victims as well as other activists visualise the emotionally fraught atmosphere for example through photographs of disappeared people, stitched memory blankets, pictures of suspicious state officials, wreathes or modified symbols like blooded national flags. Furthermore, the deployment of speeches, read poems or songs, depend on or are linked to the absences of dead and disappeared people. A deeper analysis of these different kinds of articulations is then a key issue for an adequate and fuller understanding of such spatial events and the distinctive and heterogeneous processes of meaning production. For example, throughout the participant observation of a protest activity the researcher got directly into conversation with nearly every activist who stitched such memory blankets that day. With further activists, conversations took place in the aftermath of the event by discussing mainly with photographs about the meanings and significances of used protest materialities. The application of these methods facilitated the researcher to receive access to subjective motivations of specific protest practices, its individual meanings and relationalities. With regard to the role of present absences there could be revealed that for one part the stitched blankets are associated with a concept that refers to broader societal issues through a relation to specific historical moments (e.g. the Mexican revolution) and cultural practices (e.g. relevance for some indigenous groupings). For others, stitching blankets primarily signified a more personally attribution and was referred to a practice of memory for disappeared relatives. This means, that an apparently coherent spatial constitution is much more heterogeneous and related to a broad range of distinctive historical, cultural and individual processes. All of them can be considered as being elements that were spatially absent but constitutive for the material presences of that protest activity and therewith exactly refer to what we call 'present absences'.

The methodological and methodical implications of ethnography have been crucial for an investigation of such a research topic. Especially the frequent interactions with activists through participation in movements´ regularly reunions, the informal talks and the study and analysis of textual documents helped to understand the relations between the social movement and the socio-political background. But throughout the research process, at several times and places, also arose 'moments of *im*possibility' for interrogations. Despite of potentially valuable information through an ongoing interviewing or talk, in many cases a more profound inquiry of mentioned issues was considered disrespectful and inappropriate. The fact that the research dealt at least partially with personal fates in highly uncertain circumstances and despite of a potentially deeper scientific understanding of these geographies of resistance, ethical and moral boundaries dramatically showed in an often subtle and intuitive way the frontiers of scientific knowledge production in this research context.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we pointed from a geographical point of view to the inherence of spatiality in social life. By scrutinising the assumptions of concretism and presentism in spatial imaginations we argued that the methodological question regarding the role of absence and presence in the constitution of socio-spatial phenomena still seems somewhat underexplored by social scientists. By briefly introducing the exemplification of the urban-rural divide, we examined why a sole focus on presences cannot explain the full spatiality of social life. We revealed that what is indeed necessary is a broader and detailed consideration of the importance of absences in contemporary socio-spatial relations. Consequently we call for a need to further investigate what we introduced as 'present absences' in space constructions. In order to specify our main argument – ethnographic methods as adequate for investigating 'present absences' – at first we introduced and discussed crucial methodological and epistemological implications of the ethnographic approach. On this basis, we were able to further exemplify how the absence/presence relationship in space constructions could be addressed by a mere analytical distinction between rather "obvious" and rather "hidden" absences in order to operationalise the complex relationship of absence/presence. We argued that exploring present absences unavoidably requires a constant and often spontaneous scrutinising of observed and identified issues and their multidimensional relationality regarding the relationship to present absences. With the empirical example of the geographies of resistance in the '*War on Drugs*' we could exemplify the strengths of such a methodical endeavour. In sum, to us it seems that this methodical procedure is the necessary and adequate approach to trace and reveal the different meaning attributions of diverse actors, individuals or groups that lie beyond *obvious* aspects of absences. Our analytical distinction serves to emphasise and grasp the flexibility and creativity of individual and subjective meaning production beyond representations and therewith can help to better understand the complexity of socio-spatial relations.

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