

Review of Daria Tolokonnikova's BA thesis *Young and footlose in Europe: Identity, Representation, and Participation in Independent Travel Writing*, by David Verbuč

In her BA thesis about travel blog writing as related to Prague's travel experiences, student Daria Tolokonnikova presents an original and relevant ethnographic discussion of representations and constructions of localness and the traveler's identity. The thesis includes some quite sophisticated parts for the BA level thesis (particularly in Chapter 2), but also exhibits a few shortcomings, both of which I discuss below. I structure this review by addressing the following issues (in this order): theory, methodology, structure and style of writing, and results (with argumentation).

Tolokonnikova's research is well grounded in theory, which she convincingly commands. She uses multiple and diverse sources and appropriately puts them in dialogue with her own ethnographic findings. Her research questions are also well designed, so that they resonate both with theory and ethnographic data. The main thesis statement therefore stands out as methodologically original and theoretically advanced. In terms of methodology, I like how the student focuses not only on the discursive level of travel writing and representation, but also balances it out and puts it in conversation with the material level of social practice approached through participant-observation. In this way, the student can analyze the construction of localness and the travel identity through a variety of related perspectives. Certainly, Tolokonnikova's research would prove more solid with an incorporation of a larger sample of travelers and their blogs, and by participating at more travel-related local events and activities, as well as perhaps with an inclusion of local voices. Because of these limitations, the ethnographic data that the student operates with is sometimes thinner than it would be desired, but in my opinion still achieves its aim and works well for this level of writing.

The macro structure of the thesis organically emerges from the ethnographic data, as it follows different stages of travel writing, as well as different core themes that proved to be most relevant in this regard (identity, social interaction, representation). In regard to the chapter structure, I welcome the student's engagement with introductory vignettes, which are not only engagingly written but also well integrated with the main theoretical concerns of each chapter. The micro structure of sentences and paragraphs mainly works well, but there are also some stylistic problems in this regard, which I address next.

In terms of language and style, the thesis works relatively well. In many places, the theoretical language reaches quite a high level of sophistication. However, there are occasional problems with clarity of writing, especially when more complex ideas are being explained. Sometimes, the student would need to restate what the main argument is in particular subsections (and case studies), or how those sections are related to theory or the main thesis statement (particularly in regard to the following sections: the section about the relation between food and class in Chapter 1, Tom's and Gloria's case studies in Chapter 1, application of Bourdieu theory in Chapter 2, nuclear bunker case in Chapter 2, and binary socialism vs historical complexities in

Chapter 3). In most of these cases, the main argumentation can still be extrapolated with some effort, but the writing should make these cases more transparent, fluid, and reader-friendly. I argue that in most of the problematic sections of this thesis, the main issue is the style of writing (clarity), but sometimes this is also related to weaknesses in argumentation.

The analysis of ethnographic data parts of this thesis mainly work sufficiently well in terms of solid and valid argumentation that supports the main thesis statement of each chapter, and of the whole work. I would particularly like to stress the quality of the Chapter 2 in this regard, which includes several cases of a refined discourse analysis (particularly in regard to the discussion of indirect indexicality, first-, second-, and third-person narratives, and other rhetorical devices), and a skillful ‘thick description’ of ethnographic data as related to the complexities and contradictions of a variety of emic perspectives on the topic of traveler/tourist distinction. With some additional ethnographic research and rigorous revisions, this chapter could be turned into a fine and publishable research paper. In comparison, Chapter 1 is a bit weaker, mainly due to afore-mentioned occasional lack of clarity, but still works relatively well for the BA level of writing. However, Chapter 3 did not turn out as a success of this project, mainly due to its short length, and its lack of more compelling ethnographic case studies. Moreover, the chapter would benefit from more rigorous unpacking of particular problematic discursive moments found on travelers’ blogs as related to the notion of binary socialism. These discursive binarisms would also needed to be juxtaposed with more convincing examples of historical data that would provide for more complex historical reading which could then successfully contradict bloggers’ simplified binary statements. With my recommendations, student endeavored to improve this part in the last few days before the submission, but did not entirely succeed.

In summary, Tolokonnikova’s thesis evidently includes sections and chapters that vary greatly in their quality, ranging from very sophisticated to less successful parts. My assessment of the whole is that the student mainly achieved what was expected from her, and even exceeded BA level expectations in some parts of her writing.