

Evaluation of Laura Brody's PhD entitled "Memories of an Aegean Borderscape"

12 March 2024

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The thesis fulfils all requirements of a successful PhD thesis. I recommend the PhD to be defended. In my evaluation of this thesis, it passes the defence. Moreover, given the substantial quality of the thesis, the grade I wish to allocate is a "pass with distinction", in line with the special provision of MOVES.

In short, the thesis is a high-quality text, well-written, and methodologically, empirically and theoretically sound. With its emphasis on the construction of belonging and memory, the thesis offers a relevant contribution to a variety of academic fields and disciplines. In particular, the emphasis on the complexity (and fluidity) of identification is highly appreciated, while also the attention for the specificity of Imvros contributes to the quality of the work. By combining a focus on how hegemonic identity constructions co-exist with counter-hegemonic identities, the author deconstructs the frequently used binaries of hegemony and counter-hegemony, through a focus on everyday lived experience, providing a counterweight to the prevailing nationalist and community-romanticizing discourses (or myths).

The quality of the thesis also becomes apparent when looking at its different components:

The first pages of the **introduction** use a more creative language, a genre which is maintained for exactly the right number of pages, introducing the reader into the topic and then shifting to a more academic language.

The author points, already in the introduction, to the specificity of language, and the always present language politics. It is one of the appreciated elements of self-reflection, which I appreciate. At the same time, some of the terms that have been chosen, which might appear to be everyday/common language—e.g., "settlers" and "diasporans", but also the reference to Turkey as non-Europe (see e.g., p. 22 & 30)—would also have deserved a reflection, connecting them to the impossibility of avoiding these language politics.

The introductory chapter and chapter three also contain an appreciated **historical contextualization** of Imvros, centred around the population exchange of the 1920s, also providing a slightly broader narrative on Greek-Turkish relationships (e.g., with reference to Cyprus). Here, arguably, more could have been done to sketch the history of Greek-Turkish relationships, ranging from, for instance, the Greek independence war against the Ottoman Empire (with its massacres, e.g., on Chios), over the Balkan Wars (not just in relation to the annexation of Imvros, which is covered) to the still ongoing Aegean Sea conflict. Even though the thesis already has a considerable length, addressing this complex history might have allowed the author to reflect more (e.g., in the conclusion) about the specificity and importance of the existing co-habitation on Imvros.

Also the **theoretical discussion** (partially in the introduction, and for the main part in C1) is of high quality. The core concepts are sufficiently linked to the theoretical/conceptual literature, their definitions are clear, and they are later (in the empirical parts) properly

activated. Here, two questions arise, though, about the use of the concept of hegemony. First, the author seems to switch between more Gramscian approaches (focussing on political-material alliances) and more discursive approaches (focussing on ideological domination), which is potentially confusing. Second, the author proposes a distinction between non-hegemony and counter-hegemony, which is highly promising, but hardly used in the later parts of the thesis. More could have been done here, I believe. A similar issue can be raised about the notion of borderscape, which has a multiplicity of meanings—and the author navigates well through these complex territories—but the question is here whether the liminality of the border should not have been emphasized more, in particular because liminality is later used extensively, when talking about identities.

When it comes to the **methodology**, we find in the thesis a very clear, balanced and well-structured discussion on methodology, method and applied procedure. The links with the relevant methodological literature are appreciated. In addition, I particularly liked the reflections on stillness and mobility, and repetition. The text is also highly self-reflexive, which is a necessity for this kind of ethnographic work. Still, I think that a number of elements could have been articulated more/better:

- The thesis is connected to grounded theory (GT), but more could have been done to explain the different traditions of GT, and the author's position. For instance, "putting aside any preconceptions" (p.76) might be considered by some of these GT traditions as problematic. Moreover, the objective of GT is also (at least in theory) to engage in theory building, which this thesis does not really do that much;
- The thesis spends no attention on saturation, and does not include an explicit discussion on quality enhancement/protection of the analysis, although the latter is put into practice well (e.g., through theoretical grounding, procedural transparency and self-reflexivity). Indicative is also the absence of the concept of iteration, although the *practice* of iteration is explained (p. 108);
- The recent addition of a discussion on the data analysis methods is appreciated, but this part is very short, and not sufficiently linked to the methodological literature (e.g., thematic analysis is mentioned, but not explained or embedded in the methodological literature);
- Also the ethical dimension of the research (e.g., harm avoidance) could have been addressed more explicitly. On particular question here is about the phasing-out strategy (which is not discussed, while the author indicates that she is still in touch with some of the respondents);
- The focus on researcher-based limits (e.g., language skills and insider/outside dialectics, for the latter discussion, see p. 89) is very appreciated, but there is no sufficiently developed discussion about the method-based limits of the research. At the very end, on the last page, there is a short reference to the lack of generalizability, but a more structured and extensive discussion on the project's limits would have been better.

The **analytical chapters** are a clear strength of the thesis. The ethnographic approach is well-chosen, and well-translated into practice; the thesis provides rich insights into the participants' complex life worlds, while still remaining connected to the theoretical framework that the thesis deploys. Even though the examples might, once in a while, be a

bit long, they remain examples that illustrate a well-performed analysis, which is pleasant to read, and never shifts into the mere descriptive, but remains at the level of the analytical. I must confess that I particularly appreciated the attention for the materiality of nature, and for olfactory elements, and their connections to memory and identity.

One point is that the empirical parts are quite long, which creates an imbalance with the theoretical part. The length bears witness of the respect that the author has for her respondents, and the thick description is still appreciated, but the question here is whether the analysis would not have been communicated better, from the reader's perspective, if it would have been a bit shorter. Sometimes, less is more. One other concern is that the empirical analysis seems to offer little space for exceptions. We now have a very smooth narrative, where everything fits and there are no contradictions. Is the author sure that this social reality is as smooth as it is represented in the thesis?

Finally, even though the quality of the **conclusion** is sufficient, I would still like to argue that the conclusion is too short and a bit underdeveloped. Arguably, this conclusion does not bring a higher level of abstraction to the reader. Here, the questions about what we can learn from the author's work, at level of theory, methodology and identity construction, and what do we have to remember and use to strengthen identity studies, migration studies and memory studies, remain too un-answered. A minor issue is the author's plea for more humanity-centred approaches (p. 243), which is promising, needs to be unpacked more, in its meaning, but also in its difference from human-centred approaches.