

## **Review of Veronika Turek's MA thesis *Expats and the "Wall of Czechness": An Ethnography of Expat Spaces in Prague***

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Veronika Turek's MA thesis about expat women in Prague and how they address the challenges of living in a foreign country through the spatial tactics of place-making in general presents a lot of rich ethnographic data and provides plenty of interesting and relevant findings as related to the main goals of the thesis, but it also demonstrates some downsides that need to be addressed. In my review, I therefore discuss both the strengths and weaknesses in relation to the thesis' design, methodology, theory, and interpretation/analysis.

First, in terms of the thesis **design** (i.e., relation between goals-methods-analysis), I should acknowledge that the student manages to find many successful methods and ethnographic data that support her goals in relation to expat women's place-making (e.g., particularly the study of maps, and the study of the both online groups), but I miss more engaged examination of the relationship between online and offline spaces in terms of place-making (which should be one of the main goals of the thesis, as stated on page 19). The student achieves this in the section about GGI group, but not in relation to other sections of the thesis (for example, it would be interesting to learn which of the physical and/or geographic places marked in the maps section are also linked to online spaces and activities). While the student states on page 19 that she does not want to neglect the *online* spaces in this offline/online relation of place-making (which is an important goal), I have a feeling that she does the opposite, and neglects the *offline* spaces, as we learn very little through ethnographic analysis of how place-making is achieved among expat women in relation to offline/physical/geographic places in Prague (which are probably not so insignificant in shaping their expat experience).

Second, in relation to the **methodology** section, there are some important clarifications missing from it. For example, the student says she wants to study female expats in Prague which are not "passive" women dependent in their move on their partners/husbands or on companies/institutions, but are active individuals who are relatively independent in terms of their migration experience (see pages 12, 24, 25). This is a very important goal, but it is not convincing in relation to student's sampling of the women interviewed in the work, as many of the main factors defining these women are not explained in the methodology section, e.g., their marital status, occupation, age, time spent in Prague, motives for moving to Prague, etc. We learn some of this information in small bits throughout the work (for some of the women, but not all), but this should be clearly explained in the methodology part. The student also contradicts herself in some places in this relation by saying that two women from her study group moved to Prague due to their partners (Kiera and Helen, on page 31), or when she writes on page 83, that "these women, none of whom have kids, are simply accompanying their husband as expats in foreign countries". It is therefore not clear nor convincing that this study is really analysing *independent* and not also *dependent* expat women in Prague (and which of the women discussed belong to the first or the second category). In addition, I also miss more elaboration in the methodology section on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted for the thesis.

Third, in relation to **theory**, the student in general makes a very good job by explaining and integrating various theories in her work (especially in relation to the concept of expats,

imagined and peg communities, safe spaces, counter-public spaces, and the notion of home away from home). However, I miss more rigour in relation to the definition of place vs space (the student only recognizes one meaning for “space” as abstract space with no meaning, and with that creates confusion, when she starts using also other meanings of this concept in her work, such as social space or space-making, etc—see page 16). There are many scholars who define “space” differently (e.g., Cresswell vs De Certeau), and the goal of the theory section is to clarify these kinds of theoretical nuances. There is also some confusion in relation to the theory of “community” in student’s writing. Namely, the student claims on page 65 that she wants to work only with “discursive” notion of community, which also includes the concept of “imagined” community, but not with the “material” aspects of it (without providing any justification for this decision), but then she also discusses “emplaced encounters” as related to community-building and place-making (p. 65), which in theoretical terms falls under the concept of “material” (social) constitution of community. This might appear to be a small confusion, but it is significant from both the theoretical framework and interpretation perspectives.

Fourth, in terms of **ethnographic analysis** in the main chapter, the student provides many compelling ethnographic examples and interpretations that support her main thesis, but there are also some problematic or insufficient sections in between. For example, in relation to the maps, the student overlooks many significant elements included in those maps which contribute to the expat women’s place-making experiences and which are then not analysed in the thesis. In many maps, food places, nature places and parks, culture/art places, markets, and cafés seem to be some of the more central places that shape expat women’s experiences in Prague, but these analytical starting points are not taken on by the student, who could develop them further (both analytically and methodologically). Moreover, some of the maps show emotional attachment to those places (by the use of hearts for some parks, or adjectives such as “sunshine” and “focal point of existence” for JZP), but these leads are also underexplored. This also relates to the student’s claim on page 62, where she writes: “From the research I conducted, no dichotomy of a “clean” Inside and “dirty” and “chaotic” Outside [was found]. Prague does not hold this same differentiation, whereby there are no geographic spaces that separate the locals from expats.” This seems odd, if we consider the inclusion of “litter” (literally “dirt” or “trash”) next to IP Pavlova in Alena’s map (map no. 5, page 57), or a statement by Becka (in reference to her map no. 1) that Bafezda bar is “only fun to go to with people who speak Czech because they’re rude if you speak too much English [there]” (p. 53). There obviously exist places that are perceived by some expat women as “dirty” and same as exclusive (i.e., “not fun ... if you speak too much English”), but this data is somehow ignored and misinterpreted in the thesis (see the above quote from p. 53), and I am sure much more could be probably said about exclusive (or even unsafe) nature of some offline “local” spaces from the expat women perspective. But, as I have already noted in my first point above, much of the offline (physical, geographic) aspects of place-making are underexplored in the thesis.

In sum, while I consider this thesis to be relatively strong in relation to much of its ethnographic and theoretical writing, I also find many weaknesses in it that are undermining its generally positive outlook. Therefore, I evaluate this thesis as not entirely worthy of grade 1, but perhaps also not entirely deserving grade 2, and I would like to make a final evaluation only after I hear the student’s defence.