Fixing ruptures in the neighborhood

Katerina Sidiropulu Janku
Centre for the cultural sociology of migration FSS MU
e-mail:katerinasj@mail.muni.cz

INTRODUCTION

At the edge of winter and spring 2017 the call for papers of the conference Contested Borderscapes conference caught my eye. After the intense experience of leading the applied interdisciplinary project Memory of Roma Workers (Sidiropulu Janků 2015) I remained attracted to the alternative formats, so call for not only presentations, but also workshops and artistic interventions seemed like a very logic sequel for my work. As it often happens, I wrote my abstract warily, but urgently at the same time,
I felt rush from inside. Nothing and no one urged me to sign in for the conference, yet I felt the need and temptation to try something out of the box. Later at the edge of Spring and Summer, when I started to put together the travel means, I was deciding between more academic and more experimental contribution one more time. With the awareness of risk of the failure my choice might bring, and with the awareness I can afford this risk, since the funding for the travel expenses is not bound to any scientific grant, I decided to go for a more experimental format.

Lesvos has always been a place of moved and ever changing history of inhabitants and political affiliations. Second half of the 20th century mélanged this already complicated spawn with massive growth of tourism. Local inhabitants now have to face other “hybrid users of the space/place” – the refugees and clients of international network of smugglers in one person. The political borders determine creating the social boundaries, the pragmatic process of looking after arriving people’s basic existential needs strengthens the existing structures that might as well deepen the potential ruptures between locals and newcomers. I planned to focus on less political layer of ruptures rooted in the day-to-day life of a space/place, the one of neighborhood.

Being an ethnographic sociologist with an experience of participatory/action research, I decided to apply diverse methods of creating a dialogue. I understand dialogue as a form of bridging boundaries on individual, social and structural level. The emotions were welcomed into the creative process as an ingredient to work with reflexively, not the determinative principal leading the process. Due to the placing my contribution to conventional presentation and discussion based parallel session, I was aware I will not have much space for experimenting with presentation of the results itself. At the end I choose set of pictures followed by reading my analytic diary and invitation of audience into creating origami boats, in order to bring in some tangible transforming element into the room.

The term discursive sub-political intervention originated from the conceptual debates above the project Memory of Roma Workers. Its meaning refers to avoiding disproving the conflicting arguments (in the context of Lesvos situation in Autumn 2017 this would be securitization discourse on migration and spectacular presentation of migration), with the aim of disqualify or persuade the rival, rather focusing
on bringing in new layers of meanings, that are bound into the daily experience of bearers of chosen social phenomena (in the context of Lesvos situation in Autumn 2017 this would be everyday neighborhood experience with common dwelling of old settlers, tourist and asylum seekers) in order to propose more vivid and enjoyable forms of everyday interactions in shared spaces, and possibilities of co-creation valuable elements (possibly, but not necessarily material) of everyday life for everybody engaged in the process. As such the discursive sub-political interventions are bound in modern individualistic understanding of human beings, but equally emphasize the value of dialogue and cooperation as necessary means of expressing the humanity.

To fulfill my aim, I decided to combine observations, walks and interviews in the chosen neighborhood, I did realized online pre-research before my travel to Lesvos, and I included analysis from the research project Political Participation among Refugees in Austria and the Czech Republic: Biographical Perspectives (PARAC), that we conducted with my colleagues from the Center for the Cultural Sociology of Migration Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky and Radka Klvaňová in 2016.

I am now inviting the reader to join me in this socio-spatial experience of looking for the proper discursive sub-political intervention in chosen neighborhood of Lesvos. I combine field notes, analytical and poetic notes with interview transcripts and visual materials, leading towards the proposed intervention. To some it may seem like sort of a traveler’s diary, and they will be to an extent right. As Alain de Botton states in the Art of Travel (2004), traveling is more than physical dislocation. It is a state of mind, analytical activity. The perspective of a traveler (which I as a matter of fact was) enlightens the thousands of refugees’ experience in past three years in Lesvos in the proper light for the suggested intervention.

LOCATION: GREEK ISLAND LESVOS, CAPITAL CITY MYTILENE, OLD HARBOR

Going through the Astra flying agency magazine on board of the plain form Munich makes me think about the Greek identity. There is definitely blue color, hope. Fatalism, humbleness and pride. Fisherman also comes to idea. The islands. The adver-
tiement of Victor distillery (n.d.) has light blue logo and depicts part of fisherman’s body pulling the fishnet to the fishing boat, sea surface and includes slogan “Proud as Greek”. Another advertisement is for the beer named 56 Isles (n.d.) and depict dark blue bottle of beer lying on the sea shore.

There are about 90,000 inhabitants in Lesvos, out of that 15 000 in Mytilene. The estimation is that around 6 000 refugees were are in the camps in Autumn 2017, but it was probably even more, and the sanitary conditions were horrible, especially in the camp Moria (Deutsche Welle 2017). Later on when I speak to one of the inhabitants of Moria camp, he describes: “Usually the camp inhabitants living in Moria look rougher and more devastated by living in the camp, to an extent you can tell difference on the street. This place is overcrowded and violent.” I am aware that these urgent and humanitarian issues have to be looked after with the highest priority, I am putting them aside in order to look at the everyday life in neighborhood, that has not stop since Summer 2015, even though it has sure been severely influenced by the events.

When we are landing, I am looking out of the airplane window, seeing some square buildings in open landscape, perhaps the detention center. My local landlord is waiting for me in the airport. He knows what is my interest in coming to an island and he is introducing me Lesvos. He mentions two refugee camps, Kara Tepe and Moria, not the third possibility for refugees, initiative PIKPA. We drive through the Mytilene city center, we pass people bathing in the sea. “People are still swimming!” I say. “Yes. Yesterday I went fishing and the sea had 21 degrees. Some people still swam.” Lately, he speaks more about fishing as a way of life and dealing with the life events: “We are all trying to help them. Once I was fishing and there was a boat full of people. They just left them between Turkish and Greek waters. They just left them there. So I went to them, wanting to help them. But, but there was too many people.” I also open the issue of lived Greek-Turkish relationships, Turkey is on sight distance from Lesvos. Do you ever go to Turkey?”, I ask. “I was there four or five times. But all the Greek buildings that are there, the Turks leave them to be destroyed. This I do not like.” I want to know more from the other side: “And how about Turks? Do they ever come here?”, I continue. “Not so much, but last two years they started to come here more often.”
As any other location, the social relations of Lesvos are dynamic and ever changing. But, as is the case of many locations, big historical events tend to frame the location as social space (Lefebvre 1991), by material changes and organization of political and economic life, as well as by conceptualization of a space by its permanent and temporary dwellers. Last meaning-making big historical event so far was something Nicolas DeGenova named migration spectacle (2013). In Lefebvrian sense, this historical event reached the coasts of Lesvos way before it reached the front pages of world-wide mass and social media. Americans Robin and Robert Jones travel to Lesvos regularly since 1974 and they have summer house there. In April 2015 they witnessed the start of massive arrivals of people on boats in the Lesvos area where they possess a Summer house:

“They were dining with friends at their beautiful home when they looked out the window and off in the distance approaching perilously in the sea was an inflatable raft filled over capacity with people wearing bright orange life vests. There were mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, babies and grandparents. It would be the first of many rafts to come ashore to their tiny town of 1,000 people.” (Melancon 2017)

Later that year, the estimation of daily arrivals to this village was 1,000 people. This overwhelming and heartbreaking situation was repeating on many shores of Lesvos. The Jones started art project for refugee children and published a book (Jones, Jones 2016). Robert Jones describes:

For our tiny village, it was very difficult as there was no organized help at all. None of us knew what to do as we weren’t trained on how to handle the situation. (Melancon 2017)

I wonder, how life is for refugees in Lesvos. My informant says “all the dark people are refugees”, as if before their arrival, Lesvos were a mono-ethnic place. We drive to local Statue of Liberty; neither the name nor the pose are random, it was made by Greek artists as direct reminiscence to the one standing in New York (Section n.d.). Several people are sunbathing there, some of them probably refugees, if I would take my informant´s description seriously. This is the place of encounter, the true public space. Sun, beaches, small picturesque Greek town.
We are passing by a woman with wounded face and two children. I wonder about the horrible things that have happened to her, but in the same time, I do not see how pity would be a way straightforward. I do not see on what basis we can meet anyway. Not because of her face, but because probable language barriers between us, and possible other barriers as well. Even though we are probably both double mums, gender or family situation is not usual common base for creating relationship for me. But gender comes to my mind anyway. I ask my informant about the safety in Mytilene. I am concerned about the general rules of lonely women wondering around the city. He answers with clear reference to the presence of refugees, as he mentioned some robbery and raping in Lesvos after the big amount of refugees came to the area: “Yes, it is safe. For now.” I hear tension in his voice, suggesting that the situation can escalate eventually, but I do not ask any further.

Seeing refugees downtown of Lesvos reminds me of a woman we interviewed for
the PARAC research, who used the word “hell” associated with something else than war events. In her case the narrator refers to the beginning of her residency in the Czechia, a place where she came to find secure refuge:

_Actually, my decision to leave was, in the moment when I saw my daughter, like, she was almost 3 years, she was down, afraid, because we started to hear a lot of shooting and it expecting when you... When you, eh, start to listen to sound of shooting, for sure a lot of... What it’s called... Shot will come from window or from... So she was really so afraid, with very... Very, like, red face, she was... We have couch, she was laying under it and she was like: “Oh my mommy, I’m afraid, I’m afraid.” So, actually, in that moment, I w... I said: “Okay, I will not let my daughter live on this life.” This is the main reason for me to leave. I was so afraid about her. I give her life there, so it’s my responsibility. I know here it will give me a lot of difficult stuff, but I take decision. And really like when I came to here, first year for me it was like a hell. Really, it was very, very bad situation for me. For example, my two sisters take the decision to return back. They don’t take life here how it’s hard. (PARAC 2016)

How would that women we passed by at the Statue of Liberty describe her first days, weeks, months in Europe?

Bing aware that the intervention should take place in semi-private, neighborhood context, the area around The statue of Liberty does not seem proper. It is a public space, but it is surrounded by museums and business buildings rather than residential houses, and if these are here they are rather villas behind high fences, not creating the neighborhood semi-private dynamics. We continue towards the Kara Tepe refugee camp, that is near by Old Harbor in the next gulf, the area seems to be more appropriate for the intervention. There is Sinikismos residential area near harbor, and Kara Tepe refugee camp up the hill, about half an hour walking distance.

We are passing by Tavernas, following up the hill towards the refugee camp. We meet several small groups of people streaming from and to camp. “That is how they spend their day. Some of them may go out and they have to return for the night.”, says my guide. I decide to explore closer the neighborhood life, both in the Sinikismos neighborhood and around the Kara Tepe refugee camp – the camp itself is closed up place, to an extent total institution (Goffman 1961, Opondo & Rinelli 2015), and see if there are any linkages that might have been used to fix the existing ruptures.
I wake up, hearing slight cracking sound. The rising wind coming from the open sea is playing with the balcony door. The sun is about to rise, the scene is very poetic. Sea wind. Waves hitting the shore. The omnipresent sound pervading all life, happy and broken, in Lesvos. Sea. In the Sinikismos neighborhood of Lesvos, every day refugees, tourists and old-settlers stare at the sea many times. The view at sea is always there, and bears numerous meanings, associations, it is with all its sounds and expressions as a huge being with which people live side by side. Both, tourists as well as refugees do not come to intervene with local people more than necessary. In terms of quality of relationships, it is similarly tricky for local social dynamics, it only has different economy. All come with hopes for bettering their existence, none intend to stay. Local people stay. Refugees who stay usually stay because they are stuck, not because they intend to. Tourists stay as long as they have money and time available. What valuable social relationships may be built upon such temporary and provisional conditions of many?

Figure 2. Sinikismos neighborhood viewed from the Old harbor. Kara Tepe refugee kamp is located right from the port warehouse at the horizon.

DAILY LIFE OF THE SINIKISMOS NEIGHBORHOOD
I am walking through the area, from the church to small harbor it is less than 10 minutes. Inside the area there are several grocery stores, family houses, some of them wide open in the evening, old men sitting in the entry hall. Some of the houses have outside benches, but they are built in the house outskirts, so it is clear they are not meant to be used by the by-passers. Unlike in the downtown of Mytilene, I am not meeting any refugee-like-looking people in the alleys of Sinikismos. The grocery store cashier is very surprised I am not Greek, he is pointing at my nose, at my face, the general visage, perhaps he is also not expecting foreigner in his store. Seeing how people are dressed in the streets of Mytilene I changed my bag for less fancy one, did it help me to melt in, making myself less visible? Going from the store towards the harbor makes me think about the local ruptures, like the abandon store one street down the road. Another old man in the entry hall of the house greets me. Having a grocery store plastic bag, I feel more local now, I can perform something ordinary, “in-the-box” while dancing the street ballet (Jacobs 1961) with local inhabitants, without much intervening into their routines.

Figure 3. Walking in the Sinikismos neighborhood.

The walk, shopping and small talk is nice, but I also feel vulnerable and rush back
home before it gets dark. I am not sure about the rules of lonely women moving in the streets, I don’t see many of them. On my way back I can see some fishermen in the harbor, they are probably refugees, because they do not have a boat, or a rod, just a fishing line. And they are younger and their skin is darker, than is the fisherman on the Victor distillery advertisement.

On another time, I ask my informant to take me up the hill to see the Kara Tepe refugee camp. We are riding up the hill and there we turn the car. I only watch, I do not feel like taking pictures from the car, it would seem to me disrespectful. There is big colorful inscription “WELCOME” on the fence, I am thinking about the irony of the saying, even though I understand its therapeutic and political intention. There is sprayed notice “no human is illegal” on the concrete pillar and on each side of it the carousel animal figures. I find carnival ethos quite fitting to the migration in contemporary Europe. The roles of victims and perpetrators are being reversed; no rules really function; only it is tragic, very tragic carnival this time and we can see no ending. The third artistic input into the area of Kara Tepe refugee camp I can see is the statue of two hands holding each other in a securing gesture. The statue is vertical, it associates pulling someone from water, I suppose. Here comes the sea again. In Lesvos, the sea cannot be separated from migration experience, as it cannot be separated from life experience, mere existence as such.

Going back down the hill offers a side view of the camp. It looks built into the hillside quite integrally, if I would not informed there is a camp, I would not have noticed it, which I consider positive, it provides its inhabitants some symbolic privacy. The road is abandoned, no-space, like it is usual in Greece; besides several graffiti and a sidewalk, there is no sign of possibilities of making the sidewalk homey, therefore it only supports that the surroundings of a camp do not really function as urban neighborhood, that is obvious from the look from above. Inhabiting the corridor itself would not change it, but may everyday walks to and from town more pleasant to those undergoing it regularly.
Later on I am looking at the pictures and online maps from the area, thinking about existing ruptures, and how can small moves and actions help dealing with them in order to at least minimize them. I think it would only be fair to admit, that ruptures do and will exist there; as in any social landscape.

RUPTURED SOCIAL SPACES

In 2007 Columbian artist Doris Salcedo realized the first installation changing the very space of Turbine Hall in Tate Modern gallery, questioning the sacred, untouchable status of the gallery as a space of encounter with artistic contents. Salcedo installed huge opening rupture on the floor and named it with a Biblical name Shibboleth, referring to the mechanism of distinguishing between those who belong and those who remain damned.

``The history of racism’, Salcedo writes, ‘runs parallel to the history of modernity, and is its untold dark side’. For hundreds of years, Western ideas of progress and
prosperity have been underpinned by colonial exploitation and the withdrawal of basic rights from others. Our own time, Salcedo is keen to remind us, remains defined by the existence of a huge socially excluded underclass, in Western as well as post-colonial societies.” (Tate 2007a).

The Tate Modern gallery archived four digital pictures of the art piece, unfortunately not a single one includes the visitors of Turbine Hall (Tate 2007b). When I visited the installation in 2007, it was not the rupture on the Turbine Hall floor itself, but tangling of Turbine Hall visitors around, and in it, that caught my attention.

Figure 5. Visitors of the Shibboleth installation in Tate Modern Turbine Hall, October 2007.

Once there is a rupture, people are driven to react, even the ignorance is a reaction of a sort. In case of social ruptures, the diverse reactions change the appearance of the rupture, its nature and its effect. As Robert Jones evaluates the actions he and his
wife took in Lesvos, including publishing the book reflecting the art workshops with refugee children: “It was our way of healing from the experience. We couldn’t turn away from what had happened.” (Melancon 2017)

The notion of rupture is establishing principle of biographic sociology. Narrating through, and out of the experience of rupture has not only therapeutic effect on human being, it also uncovers existing social structures and norms, how they are perceived by people as social actors. The mechanism of restoration the rupture is thus leading principle of constructing social reality as understandable and viable. That is why often biographic research focuses on either visible ruptures, like East-West European biographies (Brechtner et al. 2000), or uncertain and emerging identity projects (Nurse 2013).

Neighborhood as everyday life place with manageable size and essential influence on social life of its dwellers is well-fitting scale for looking for rupturing elements of social life and finding micro solutions or transformations of them. That is how I understand Centner’s notion of microcitizenship (2011), where everyday claim for space use predominates political identities or economic power. In Centner’s understanding, rupture may be understood as set of conflicting or competitive claims that are being negotiated. The possible processes of negotiating these claims by various actors are of significant importance for understanding the nature of raptures in neighborhood. Focus on neighborhood is helping to take into consideration dwellers with different life styles, access to capitals (including social media) while doing so, and therefore for example not taking out the oldest generations of dwellers, that are essential part of Greek islands neighborhoods. Here are six notions of ruptures in Sinikismos neighborhood I took into consideration when working on the discursive intervention plan.

- For Kara Tepe dwellers, there is not real neighborhood; their everyday urban landscape is a rupture itself. There might be the neighborhood dynamics inside the camp, but I had not the chance to examine it, and it will have specific dynamic of a total institution influencing the neighborhood relations, therefore I consider my analytical tools as not fitting it.
- Inside the Sinikismos neighborhood, I am facing functioning neighborhood (people grating each other on the streets, having small chats in grocery store etc.), it is only too private and not enough secondary in terms of neighborhood
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social relationships. Therefore the little harbor by the statue seems like to be a good spot for the intervention, since it is more semi-private, proper mixture of personal and distant social ties that create possibilities to socialize with each other on the civic base.

- With refugees living near Sinikismos, the Sinikismos street dynamics did not seem to change, the meeting zone is the Mitilinis-Thermis street, so this is another possible urban space for the intervention.

- There are internal ruptures inside Sinikismos, visually expressed by abandoned shops and yards.

- There is historical rupture present; inhabitants of Sinikismos are looking at the Turkish land from their windows. The island belonged to the Osman Empire until 1912, we can expect there is still a lot going on inside the emotional landscape of old-settled families. Actual political situation of Greek-Turkish relationships may activate and reinforce possible conflicting, or even traumatic layers of Greek-Turkish relationships expressed in daily private lives of Sinikismos inhabitants.

- There is a rupture opening through all Europe and democratic world; it is being pronounced by lately published book The Great Regression edited by German sociologist Heinrich Geiselberger (2017). The rupture between those understanding and supporting opening up of the globalized world and those considering themselves being losers of this process. The latter approach was expressed by the “Krypteia” group bomb attack threat that happen at the beginning of the Contesting Borderscapes conference that was even covered in local online media Emprosnet. It is a burning and tricky challenge to think about our actions in a way that they do not support growing of this rupture and push politically half-heated people not being involved in the political debates and civic actions to choose sides.

COMMUNITY FISHING AS THRIVING TIME-SPACE PLAY

I am listing through the conference materials, looking at the Mosiak center. It is striking there is a literacy club, one of the taboos of contemporary Europe; the fact
that there are still illiterate people, and they do not have to be newcomers. We offer what we believe in – education. Universal inclusive instrument. For refugees, as well as for not-welcoming domestic population. I am thinking about something not-educating, just being for a while, taking into account local natural and social conditions, permanent as well as temporary. Leading people together without breaking existing barriers between them too fast or too much, so they may feel safe, keeping their shells, just peeking out for a while, with the possibility to back off again, gaining feeling of security of encounter, step by step.

Based on my observations, interview inputs, reflections and theoretical reasoning, I decided to suggest the activity of community fishing. Fishing is omnipresent in Lesvos. Old settlers fish, refugees fish (not only in Old Harbor, they can be seen fishing in the very downtown of Mytilene as well), tourists visit fishermen’s tavernas, and sometimes fish for fun too. Fishing seems like a possibility to let hard thoughts go away for a while. Also, it is sort of a men’s club. I happen to be thinking about something for men, because I do not see many women in the streets anyway. If I was to suggest something female-friendly, it seems that I would have to follow women to their spaces, that are not self-evident in Mytilene. Symbolically speaking, fishing is a play with time. You have all the time and yet, you must not miss the right time to tug the fishing line and catch the fish. It is also a play with life value. You may take a life of a fish and thus giving yourself some existential credit of a hunter. Small victories in the line of hopeless days. It can still be traumatizing for refugees to get back to the sea, but some of them might be ready and appreciate this experience, moving out of the land they are stuck in for a while. In the Old Harbor of Sinikismos, there could be a fishing boat to rent with local guide. The price could sponsor one free rental for refugees. It could be organized by local community center, disposable in one of the Tavernas of café nearby, for example the one stating “we speak Dutch here”. In virtual space, there could be organized the fishing contest on Instagram, the winner may get a fishing device.
Additionally, in order to succeed in realization phase of the intervention, I suggested set of general statements for the intervention, that in this case ended up to be the small local and social business project, but could have taken the form of site-
specific installations, material changes (for example accommodating and furnishing the corridor to Kara Tepe refugee camp), or suggestion for new municipality service for local inhabitants, the possibilities are endless.

- In neighborhood life, “the locals” should predominate “the globals” (Bauman 1998).
- There are different sorts of locals. Those living in the place for generations, but also those living in the area for days only. Citizenship or permanent residence is too rough tool to recognize locals these days. The first sign of being local is washing your laundry on regular basis in the area.
- Even in the most rural areas, there can be no functional neighborhood without generally accessible public space. The possibility of meeting a stranger should be embodied even into the smallest urban landscape.
- The dialogue is more important than universal agreement.
- No one is perfect, even more so in digital simulacra. Therefore share good stuff and inspiration with all; and communicate critique with those who can learn from it in a secured environment. It may be harmful and thus contra productive to mistake social media with the media.
- Very few works is worth not sleeping. Fair-trade is important, for each side of any social interaction, including helping volunteers, social workers and researchers.

CONCLUSION

The discursive, sub-political interventions in urban neighborhoods have specific conditions under which they can be useful and vivid tool to ameliorate the neighborhood social space. They cannot be applied without existence of public space, possibility of open dialogue and civic negotiation. They should not mix up with humanitarian aid, or more complex spatial reorganizations. In such cases they may be supplement to the process, but should not have a leading voice in such essential transformations. Such interventions are rather subtle tools of making social spaces more conscious, reflexive and, hopefully, more viable for all the social space dwellers, no matter how
permanent or temporary (I thank here Saara Mani for dragging my attention to the notion of dwelling).

The Old Harbor community fishing intervention was supposed to invite seemingly non-belonging dwellers of the space, in this case the Kara Tepe refugee camp inmates, to feel belonging on the fair level, not giving them the false impression that they belong similarly as old settlers – such gestures may only grow temporary dwellers’ frustration. For old settling dwellers it was supposed to function as gentle invitation to get out of their houses, not for long, not on regular basis, and to do something they like to do, and maybe did not do for some time, due to economic, or biographic reasons. These two kinds of dwellers were supposed to meet based on common interest, but in the third territory, not dominated by either of these social spaces – the local social business fishing boat. New structure could open new possibilities for the forms of socializing, and thus emphasizing the ever-changing nature of geopolitical order. Fishing side-by-side, not against each other, or forcibly together, could create set of micro situations, when people would start to recognize each other on the streets, and eventually greet each other also in Old Harbor, not only inside Sinikismos, or probably inside the Kara Tepe refugee camp.

Due to the capacity reasons I did not have a chance to bring the idea into the realization phase. This would take some more weeks and resources, local partners, patience and possible changes as the process would start. Since Autumn 2017 the situation in Lesvos, and in entire Aegan See region and surroundings changed, so I would have to go back and see how things are at the moment in order to start over. The discursive sub-political interventions need to be freshly designed in order to leave behind permanent inputs, otherwise they might miss the target. As Paul McCartney wrote, “Where I belong I’m right”, and without dwelling, there can be no belonging.

NOTES

1. This text would not be possible without the intellectual support of The Centre for the Cultural Sociology of Migration at Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno. I would not be able to travel to Mytilene without the generosity of the Green Foundation, Bratislava. I am
grateful to the organizers of the conference Contested Borderscapes for creating this stimulating and importunate event. Last but not least, I thank the people of Lesvos. It is not by chance they were nominated to the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 for their actions during demanding years 2015-2016. And I thank the leisure time fisherman in Mytilene for keep on trying to pull the line in the very right moment.

REFERENCES


