

Exile and migration of Pontic Greeks: the experience of loss as the presence of absence

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A thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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February 2013

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the experience and significance of absence in the lives of Pontians who live in Adelaide. Pontians are descendants from colonies of Greeks who, for at least 3000 years, inhabited the area bordering the Black Sea in northern Turkey in an area once called Pontos. Their underlying and ongoing sense of absence derives from two historical events of loss. One is from a genocide and enforced exile from Pontos wherein 350,000 of their people died between 1917 and 1923. The other is from voluntary migration when some of the Pontic Greeks who had settled in Greece, and/or their descendants, came to Australia as part of the mass migration of peoples in the mid 20th century. The memories and narratives of the traumatic loss of people and place from Pontos, and the experiences associated with migration to Australia, have played a pivotal role in the construction and experience of absence for Pontians and is an important dimension of their identity as Pontians. The memory of loss is always in the present and is evoked by present experiences and sensed through a multi-faceted expression of emotions. It is embodied in a variety of corporeal practices such as commemorations, dance, community gatherings and return visits and is experienced as an absence. Given that many of my informants have lived in Adelaide for up to fifty years, a central question of this thesis is, how do they continue to remember the loss of their former homelands and why does this elicit an often deep emotional response? In this thesis, I explore how social memory, emotions and embodiment intertwine in the practices of commemoration, dance and journeys to show how loss from the past events of exile and migration are brought into the present to be experienced as both an absence and the presence of that absence. Focusing on how the body experiences being-in-the-world through temporally and historically informed sensory engagement, as well as drawing on a conscious as well as an unconscious reservoir of meaning, loss is not only tied to past events but in and through the body becomes both an absence of a presence and the presence of an absence.

Thesis declaration

I, Valerie Liddle, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Valerie Liddle
February 2013

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank many people who have in some way helped to bring this thesis to completion. First, I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor John Gray who supervised this thesis from its inception. John's advice, analytical insights and constructive criticism have contributed much to this work. Above all, I have greatly valued his enthusiastic encouragement and untiring support. I also thank Dr. Alison Dundon for her contribution to this thesis. I appreciated her critical analysis of my work and her encouragement to consider alternative approaches. I thank also my other co-supervisors over the years: Dr. Simone Dennis and Dr. Jim Taylor. I am most appreciative of the help I received from Christine Crothers of Adelaide University. She willingly prepared the three maps in this thesis. Lastly, I thank Professor Michael Tsianikis from Flinders University for allowing me to audit Modern Greek and Dr. George Frazis and Dr. Maria Palakstsoglou for readily including me in their classes.

I acknowledge that this research was undertaken with the support of an Australian Postgraduate Award from the Australian Commonwealth Government and the Research Abroad Scholarship from the University of Adelaide.

Without the willing support of many in the Pontian community this research could not have been undertaken. First, I thank those who befriended me, included me in their activities, welcomed me into their homes and willingly gave their time to speak to me. I cannot name them all but I want to especially thank John Papadopoulos who spent many, many hours talking to me and showing what it means to be a Pontian. He also facilitated our stay at the House of Santa and for that, I am deeply grateful. I also want to thank Peter and Vaso Demourtzidis for their hospitality and in particular, for allowing my husband, John and me to accompany them on the tour of Greece with the dance group.

In Greece, there were a number of people who went out of their way to welcome me into their communities. The committee of the Seven Villages of Santa gave permission for us to stay at the House of Santa for two weeks: I especially thank Thanasis Doumanopoulos for his assistance. During our stay there and later in her village of Nea Santa, Ivonni Papakosta offered us generous hospitality and for this I thank her. A chance meeting with Anna Kapetani was invaluable. She not only offered us hospitality but acted as interpreter on a number of occasions and I sincerely thank her. In particular, I am indebted to Vasilis Asbestas, from the Black Sea Club of Veria. At

short notice, he developed a three week programme that enabled me to observe the club's dancing on a number of occasions and at different venues. Through his knowledge I learned about many different aspects of Pontic dance, which gave my thesis a broader perspective. I thank the number of Veria dancers who offered us hospitality and in particular, Eva Togkousidou and Christina Pistofidis who acted as interpreters during that time.

I also acknowledge the contribution that others from the wider Greek community have made to my research. Father John John Scherstobit gave permission for me to observe in his church and was always ready to answer my questions. Reverend Dr. Christos Tsoraklidis was always interested in my thesis and readily translated Greek texts for me. Nota Kambanaros willingly offered to be interviewed by me and was one of my first informants. She always believed that I would finish this thesis and I thank her for her support. Elisavet Galatsanos invited me to her home on many occasions and, with her mother, cooked Greek food for me. Panagiota Zacharia welcomed me into her home and shared her poetry with me allowing me to sense her loss of Cyprus as well as her determination to make a home in Australia.

I am appreciative of the advice and support of fellow postgraduate students over the years as well as that of my family and friends. Lastly and my no means least, I thank my husband, John. Over the eight years that it has taken to complete this thesis, he has listened and discussed issues with me. He has endured my frustrations, but has always encouraged me. I cannot thank him enough. He was willing to accompany me to many Pontian events, to travel to Greece with me, to take extra notes, photographs and videos and generally to act as the self-styled 'anthropologist's assistant'. I acknowledge that John, who is an accredited editor and member of the Society of Editors (SA), has edited this thesis.