

Transgressions: Crossing Gender and National Borders in Olga Tokarczuk's *Dom dzienny, dom nocny*

Recent work in cultural studies has centered on characterizing identity as a construction, and consequently questioning the perceived stability of such constructions. Instead of accepting the notion that identity is an always-already bounded structure, scholars have begun to point out its actual permeability. Two areas of this kind of investigation are notions of gender and national identity. With the advent of Queer Theory, gender identity has come to be theorized as a, in Judith Butler's words, "free-floating artifice." In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler suggests that "sex does not limit gender" and therefore there are "ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex" (112). For Butler a person "performs" their gender, and so gender is never a stable mode of identification. It is capable of constant change, forever in a state of "becoming" instead of "being."

One of the first important studies of the idea of nation as a construction is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983). Anderson defines nation as an "imagined political community" (6), and therefore national identity is merely constructed through a nation's history, literature and cultural discourses. Using Anderson's ideas, Homi Bhabha sees the nation as "an impossible unity." However, despite this impossibility, nationalist discourses continually attempt "to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress" (1). The narrative, or mythology that nationalism creates is that the nation is a bounded unity that always has been and always will be. In order for the nation to be a stable unity, it must always-already exist.

In order to bring these ideas together one merely needs to look at the way nationalist discourses define the nation by relying on a rhetoric of exclusivity, the need to bar certain groups

from partaking in the nation. As Joanna Mizielińska notes, “Many scholars point out that the nation is always constructed in opposition to the Other. The Other can be external, i.e. other nations, or the Other can live within the nation, somewhere on the margins, the internal or inner Other” (283). Because a nation desires homogeneity so it can exist in the unity of common identity, “Nationalism invents or constructs identity, basing it on the assumption of the nation’s homogeneity” (282). This homogeneity, however, is continually transgressed by the existence of various minorities, whether ethnic, religious or sexual.

A recent Polish novel that reflects the point of juncture between questions of gender and national identities is Olga Tokarczuk's *Dom dzienny, dom nocny*. It is a complex, non-linear novel that tells several stories in the telling of just one. This essay will provide an intersectional analysis of Tokarczuk's novel that will illustrate the ways it questions constructions of gender and nation, and how those constructions inform one another.

In its desire for a homogenous space, nationalist discourse demands stable gender constructions. The very beginning of *Domy*, however, opens a space for considering the fluidity of such identity. The narrator describes a dream in which he/she is "czystym patrzaniem, czystym wzrokiem i nie mam ciała, ani imienia" ["clear looking, pure vision and I have no body or name"] (7). The narrator is bodiless and nameless, and therefore without identity. This point is underscored later when the narrator states that "do mnie nic nie należy, bo ja sam do siebie nie należę, a nawet nie ma czegoś takiego jak ja" ["nothing belongs to me, because I don't even belong to myself, and there isn't even anything like 'I'"] (7). The narrator opens the novel by putting the entire category of the ego into question. The notion of any stable identity is itself suspect as the speaker cannot even identify him/herself as "I." "I" is a disembodied, floating signifier, which remains impossible to define.

Perhaps the most intriguing point of this opening scene comes when the narrator, in describing the point of view from which he/she is watching this dream says "mogę go zmieniać także w czasie, *jakbym było* strzałką na ekranie komputera" ["I can also change it in time, *as if I were* an arrow on a computer screen"] (stress mine) (8). The importance of the structure of the subjunctive in this sentence is impossible to translate into English. The best possible translation is "as if I were;" however, the significance that is lost is that Tokarczuk's narrator has expressed this statement in the neuter gender. In Polish, when one conjugates verbs in the past, the gender of the subject is also illustrated. For example, "byłem" means "I (masculine) was," whereas "byłam" means "I (feminine) was." The fact that she has conjugated the verb "to be" ["być"] as "było," means that the subject of the sentence is neither feminine nor masculine, but effectively neuter. For the subject to be feminine, Tokarczuk would have had to write "jakbym była." In fact, throughout the dream sequence there is never any indication of the narrator's gender. For the entire first chapter the reader constantly reads the "I am" of the narrator; however, even though the gendered grammar of Polish should inform the reader what the narrator's gender is, not only does the narrator deny this information, s/he purposely complicates the issue by using the neuter gender. Thus, in the dream sequence, the narrator is genderless. As Katarzyna Beilin notes, "The use of the neuter form of the verb may remind one of Blanchot's 'third *genre*' that contains the enigma lying between all binary opposites. It speaks from 'non-place,' which is the space of the Other, and it is a function of that which has no place" (451). When Tokarczuk creates the neuter "I," a genderless subject, the identity of the narrator becomes unbounded and unstable, open to multiple gender identifications.

The very structure of the novel itself is unbounded, illustrating a postmodern resistance to traditional ideas of form. The plot moves about temporally, geographically, and thematically, but

by the end comes to a single point of narration. Though the main story is of the narrator who has just moved to a small Silesian town outside Nowa Ruda, each chapter, or section, is either a story in itself or a piece of a larger story that runs throughout the text. Two of the more significant stories are about Saint Kummernis and, closely linked to her story, that of her biographer, a monk named Paschalis. Kummernis's biography is a separate "found text" that Tokarczuk implants inside the novel. She was born to a baron, and, as the author of the biography recounts, "urodziła się niedoskonała dla swojego ojca [. . .] jej ojciec bowiem pragnął syna" ["she was born imperfect for her father [. . .] because her father wanted a son"] (54). According to the dominant patriarchal order, Kummernis is the "wrong sex." She is imperfect because she cannot carry on the patriarchal lineage. After the baron marries off Kummernis's sisters, he sends her to a convent since she is too young to marry. Eventually, after several years have passed, the baron demands that Kummernis marry one of his lords. She refuses, however, saying that she is now married to Christ, and hides in a cave where she performs various miracles. Her father finally forces her to return home, where he locks her in a cell until she agrees to be married. As he tells her "Ciałem należysz do Świata i nie masz innego pana oprócz mnie. . . . Ja jestem panem twojego życia, On jest panem twej śmierci." ["In body you belong to the world and you have no lord except me I am the master of your life, He is the master of your death"] (58). After waiting several weeks, the baron suggests to the lord that he rape Kummernis so that she will have no choice but to marry him. However, when the young lord goes to Kummernis's cell, he finds that her face has been transformed into a man's, complete with beard, resembling Christ. In a rage the baron crucifies Kummernis saying "Skoro jest w tobie Bóg, to umrzyj jak Bóg" ["Since God is in you, then die like God"] (68).

The life of the character Paschalis, a young monk and Kummernis's biographer, also speaks to the instability of gender identity. His biography is quite similar to Kummernis's: "Urodził się jakiś niedoskonały, bo od kiedy pamiętał, było mu w sobie źle, jakby pomylił się w narodzinach i wybrał nie to ciało, nie to miejsce, nie ten czas" ["He was born somehow imperfect, because ever since he could remember he felt wrong inside, as though at birth he chose the wrong body, the wrong place, the wrong time"] (74). Like Kummernis he is born "imperfect;" however, unlike Kummernis, his imperfection is not the creation of any outside defining gaze, but instead comes from his own inner search for identity. When he enters the monastery and becomes a monk he changes his name from Johann to Paschalis; however, "mimo zmiany imienia, ubrania i zapachów, Paschalis nadal czuł się w sobie nieswojo" ["despite the change of name, clothes, and even smells, Paschalis still felt uncomfortable inside himself"] (75). He still does not feel as though he is himself, continuing to lack both identity and agency. He only begins to obtain subject-hood when he sees a painting of Mary, Jesus, and Saints Apolonia and Catharine. As he looks at the painting he imagines that he is in it.

Paschalis jest Świętą Katarzyna albo Świętą Apolonią—długo nie mógł się zdecydować. W każdym razie jest jedną z nich. Ma długie włosy, które spływają mu po plecach. Suknia ciasno opina mu krągłe piersi i delikatnymi, cudownymi falami spływa do ziemi. Naga skóra nóg czuje miękki pieścizoty materiału. [Paschalis was either St. Catharine or Saint Apolonia—he couldn't decide which. At any rate, he was one of them. He had long hair that flowed down his back. His dress tightly embraced his round breasts and fell to the Earth in delicate, wonderful waves. The naked skin of his legs felt the soft caresses of the material]. (75-6)

Staring at the painting, Paschalis begins to see his own male body as a female body, imagining himself as one of the female figures. He begins to define his identity as feminine though he is biologically male. Paschalis's male body, a system that the dominant patriarchal order wishes to be bounded, begins to open up. This opening up of the male body is ultimately achieved when Paschalis begins an affair with another monk, Celestyn. As they carry on their relationship, Paschalis wonders more and more what it would be like to be a woman.

Potem jednak zaczynał sobie wyobrażać, że to on jest kobietą [. . .] Sam pomysł, żeby mieć ciało kobiety, z tą sekretną dziurą między nogami, przyprawiał go o dreszcz przyjemności, aż stał się prawdziwą obsesją. [. . .] Paschalis dałby wszystko, żeby poznać tę grzeszną tajemnicę, ale nie tak, jak się poznaje rzeczy, od zewnątrz, ale stać się tym, co poznawane, doświadczyć jej na sobie samym. [He began to imagine that he himself was a woman. [. . .] The very idea of having a woman's body, with that secret hole between your legs, made him shudder with pleasure until it became an obsession. He wondered what such a thing might look like. [. . .] Paschalis would have given the world to know this sinful secret, but not in the usual way, from the outside, he wanted to live it, to experience it himself]. (80)

In this passage, the narrator makes it clear that Paschalis does not wish to take part in the female body "from the outside," but rather he wishes that the female body were his own, he wishes to be a woman. Kummernis's transformation and Paschalis's desire to become a woman both illustrate Judith Butler's idea of the fluid nature of gender identity: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequences that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body

as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as a female one" (6). Kummernis and Paschalis are perfect examples of gender as a "free-floating artifice."

Eventually, Celestyn dies, and Paschalis is left with no real friends. He makes a journey to a nearby convent to deliver food and supplies. He pretends to be sick so that the other monks will leave him behind in the convent. He becomes close to the prioress, and begs her to allow him to stay in the convent, confessing his relationship with Celestyn, and his desire to be a woman, and telling her "o swoim ciele, które nie chciało być takie, jakie było" ["about his body, which didn't want to be as it was"] (83). The prioress eventually agrees. One night she takes him to a small chapel, and shows him a statue of the crucified Kummernis. The Prioress relates Kummernis's story to Paschalis, explaining that she is not yet a canonized saint, but that the nuns already recognize her as their patron. She tells Paschalis that she wants him to write Kummernis's biography, which he will then take to Rome to petition for her canonization. The prioress chooses Paschalis to write Kummernis's biography because she recognizes the similarity between them. She sees them both as examples of the instability of basing gender identity on sex, saying "trudno ogarnąć rozumem całe boskie dzieło" ["it's difficult to comprehend all of God's works"] (83).

Paschalis agrees, and after several months finishes the biography. He makes the long journey to Rome and presents it and his petition for Kummernis's canonization to the Church authorities. He is brought before a council of bishops. They tell him that though he has written the biography quite beautifully, there are some unnerving elements of the story that verge on heresy. One bishop offers examples of the model female saint:

Święta Agata, która odmówiła ręki pogańskiemu królowi Scyllii...Obcięto jej piersi. Święta Katarzyna Aleksandryjska rozerwana końmi i ścięta, albo

Apollonia, ostoja wiary w czasie prześladowań. Przywiązano ją do słupa i wrywano jej wszystkie zęby, jeden po drugim. Albo Święta Fina, która sparaliżowana, sama potęgowała swoje męki śpiąc na kamiennym łożu, aż w końcu dała się zjeść szczurom [Saint Agatha, who refused to marry the pagan king of Sicily, who then cut off her breasts. Saint Catharine Aleksandryjska, who was torn apart by horses, or Apollonia, a pillar of faith in a time of persecution. They strapped her to a pole and pulled out her teeth one by one. Or Saint Fina, who was paralyzed, and strengthened her suffering by sleeping on the stone floor, until, finally, the rats ate her]. (162)

The bishops' refusal to canonize Kummernis indicates that the gender transgressive body is more subversive to the patriarchal order than the female. Though the Church canonizes women, it does so only to praise the subservience of the feminine to the masculine. The image of the martyred female body is one of mutilation. It should be praised in its degradation. Kummernis's body, however, is neither female nor male. It is both. In its transgression of gender boundaries it is not subservient, but subversive. The bishops understand that, as Val Gough explains:

If Christ's body in the Middle ages was constructed erotically as the battered and bleeding beloved other, it was also imagined as a maternal body that nurtured and fed. Christ-as-mother nurtured through the bleeding wound in His side, which functioned symbolically like a lactating breast, and the bodies of women mystics—through healing blood and milk, for example—took on this maternal function in their own imitatio Christi. (240)

If the faithful exalted the crucified, transgressive body of Kummernis, exalting the female and male as one, there is no reason they would not also exalt the maternal female body of Christ. As

Caroline Bynum points out, during the Middle Ages, “Both men and women described Christ’s body in its suffering and its generativity as a birthing and lactating mother” (260-61). The Church understands that once the female is recognized in Christ the hierarchy of the masculine over the feminine completely dissolves, which calls into question the entire power structure of the patriarchal order of the Church. It is essential for the hegemonic order, therefore, that gender remain a stable, bounded system.

After his failure, Paschalis begins to wander the streets of Rome. Eventually he finds himself near a brothel. A young prostitute approaches, and takes him inside. As he lies on top of her, he is unsure what he should do. She tells him, "Coś z tobą nie tak,' [. . .] 'Jesteś taki piękny, masz włosy jak kobieta'" ["There’s something wrong with you,' [. . .] "'You’re so beautiful, you’ve got hair like a girl'" (164). Like the prioress earlier, the young prostitute recognizes the instability Paschalis feels as a man. He suddenly stands up, takes her dress, and puts it on. "Zamknął oczy i przeciągnął rękami po swoich piersiach i biodrach" ["He closed his eyes and ran his hands over his breasts and hips"] (164). Then, still in the dress, "Opadł na nią powoli, wsunął się bez błędu, jakby ćwiczył to setki razy" ["He sank on top of her slowly, and entered her without a mistake, as if he had practiced it a hundred times"] (172). Until he wears the dress, he cannot perform the sexual act with a woman. Although he destabilizes classic notions of gender identities by putting on the dress, he re-stabilizes his own identity through his act of cross-dressing. In her discussion of drag in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler says:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of stable identity. [. . .] I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the

distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. (136-37)

Paschalis's simple act of putting on a woman's dress subverts the notion of a stable gender identity to such a degree that there appears to be an actual physical change as, when the narrator states in a seemingly magical-realist moment he "ran his hands over his breasts and hips." At the end of his work on Kummernis, Paschalis writes: "Proszę cię, kimkolwiek jesteś i czytasz te słowa, byś wspomniał na grzesznego Paschalisa, mnicha, który--jeśli Pan dałby mu możliwość wyboru--o wiele chętniej wybrałby ciało Kummernis, z całym jego cierpieniem i zasługami, niżli wszelkie zaszczyty królestw" ["Please, whoever you are reading these words, remember the sinner Paschalis, a monk, who--were the Lord to grant him the possibility of a choice--would much more willingly choose the body of Kummernis, with all its sufferings and merits, than the honors of kingdoms"] (68). It seems that through sheer will Paschalis has gotten his wish, transgressing gender boundaries to now resemble Kummernis, who resembles Christ.

Although Butler uses the term "free-floating artifice" to describe gender identity, the same term can be helpful in discussing national identity. Just as it becomes possible for man and masculine to signify a female body, "Poland" can signify a Polish, German, Ukrainian, or Czech body. Within this context, Poland is a perfect illustration of a pliable, unbounded nation. Throughout its history, the geographical location that is now Poland has been Russian, Prussian, German, Austrian, Czech, and Polish. The setting of *Domy* is the Lower Silesian area of Poland, or Śląsk. Before World War Two, Śląsk had belonged to Germany for generations. Following Germany's defeat after the war, the Allies pushed its border several hundred miles west, returning Śląsk to Poland. In order to make its claim to the area stronger, Poland forced out hundreds of German families from the area, and resettled Polish families from Ukraine in its new

territory, hundreds of miles from their ancestral homes. The result of this process was a hybrid space, no longer German, not really Polish, in a way Ukrainian, bordering on Bohemia and Germany. It is here that various national identities are forced to meet, and through their meeting a hybrid identity is created. At one point in *Domy*, Tokarczuk describes Nowa Ruda, the city in the center of this hybrid space. She calls it a town of

krzywych skrzyżowań, objazdów, które prowadzą do centrum, rynków, które są na peryferiach, schodów, których początek i koniec tkwią na tym samym poziomie, zakrętów prostujących drogi, rozwidleń, z których lewy wiedzie na prawo, a prawy na lewo [. . .] Miasto-okruch. Miasto śląskie, pruskie, czeskie, austro-węgierskie i polskie. Miasto-peryferie.

[crooked intersections, bypasses that lead to the center, marketplaces on the outskirts, steps that start and finish on the same level, sharp turns that straighten roads, and forks where the left branch leads right, and the right branch left. [. . .] It's a town of fragments, a Silesian, Prussian, Czech, Austro-Hungarian and Polish town, a town on the periphery] (270).

The description here of Nowa Ruda could easily be used to describe all of Śląsk. Tokarczuk attributes an almost magical nature to the region. It is a space where borders are constantly transgressed, a space of paradoxes that end up making sense. The fragmentary, fluid nature of the region deconstructs the classic nationalist ideas of national identity. As a fragmentary region it takes on attributes of all the nationalities that have inhabited it, creating from them a new hybrid region. It is the existence of differences within a nation's borders that "constantly disturbs the myth of a unified people" (Branach-Kallas, 8). We can call the people living in this area "Polish," but we must realize the arbitrary, constructed nature of that label.

One story that illustrates this is that of Peter Dieter, an ethnic German who grew up in Śląsk. He and his wife decide to visit the region now in Poland where he was raised. His wife wants to see him the moment that he sees his old village, hoping that:

zrozumie wreszcie całego Petera, od początku do końca, te wszystkie jego smutki
[. . .] te uparcie stawiane pasjanse, marnowanie czasu na głupoty, ryzykanckie
wyprzedzanie samochodów na autostradzie i wszystkie obce rzeczy, które zawsze
w nim tkwiły i nie zmieniło ich czterdzieści lat wspólnego życia.

[she will finally understand all of Peter, from beginning to end, all his sadnesses [. . .]
his stubborn patience, his wasting of time on foolishness, the risky way he
passed cars on the highway and all the strange/foreign things that sat inside him
that their forty years together hadn't changed.] (92)

Even though both Peter and his wife are "ethnically" German his wife finds him to be strange or "foreign" (obcy). Unlike his wife, Peter is a Polish-German, or perhaps German-Pole. Though the narrator never gives any specific details of his life, the implication is that he was one of several million ethnic Germans who were forced to leave Central and Eastern Europe after World War II. Simply by his presence in the novel and especially his presence in Śląsk, Peter Dieter's character demands that the reader recognize the history of this region. He references the instability of national borders and of national identity. His "implied" life is one of displacement and exile. Though he is ethnically German, he feels his home to be Poland and his wife feels him to be somewhat Polish. The question then is why can he not be considered Polish? This, of course, raises many more politically charged questions, the answering of which is not the purpose of the present work. However, what can be illustrated through Peter's character are the

consequences of adhering to notions of stable national identities, constructions based on the excluding of Others from a national discourse.

After travelling around Śląsk, Peter and his wife finally come to his old village. He decides to walk up the low mountain alone. At one point, as Peter looks around him, the narrator says "Wszystkie góry na świecie porównywałem zawsze z tymi górami i żadne nie wydały mi się tak piękne" ["He had compared all the mountains in the world with these and none had ever seemed to him to be as beautiful"] (94). He continues to walk up the mountain until "znalazł się na samym szczycie, przez który przechodziła granica" ["he found himself on the very point where the border ran"] (94). Suddenly, he finds it difficult to breath. "Jedną nogę miał w Czechach, drugą w Polsce. Siedział tak z godzinę i sekunda po sekundzie umierał" ["He had one leg in Czech, the second in Poland. He sat there an hour and second after second died"] (95). His body is eventually found by two Czech border guards. After thinking for a second about the report they would have to write, they move his one leg from the Czech side to the Polish side. A half hour later two Polish border guards find his body. After a moment's thought "w uroczystym milczeniu wzięli go za ręce i nogi i przenieśli na czeską stronę" ["in solemn silence they took him by the arms and legs and moved him over to the Czech side"] (95). Peter's entire life had been one of existing between borders, and his death is no different. He dies on an imaginary line, drawn by arbitrary means. Ironically, the Czech and Polish border guards seem to understand the illusion of stable, national borders. Instead of worrying about paperwork they simply transgress the border between their nations, moving Peter's body from one side to another, ignoring the imaginary line.

In his analysis of the concept of nation, Tomasz Sikora calls it an "effective amalgam of wildly heterogeneous elements soldered up at a discursive level that emphasizes an overall unity"

(65). For nationalist discourse there is a "longing for national coherence, the illusion of which is only possible due to forgetting, excluding, repressing and regulating" (65). Maintaining the stability of gender identity is one area of such regulation. As Sikora states, "The discursive construction of nation is replete with heterosexist assumptions and fantasies" (67). Ignoring and even repressing non-normative sexualities is one of the cornerstones of modern nation-building. For the illusion of national stability to be maintained, there must be a reproduction of the means of reproduction. Not only are same-sex relationships unproductive, they symbolically become "active agent[s] of waste, death and destruction—a threat, indeed to civilization itself" (74). Recent occurrences in Poland, such as the refusal to allow gay rights groups to march in Warsaw, illustrate the Polish government's adherence to such ideas. Another important area of maintaining national identity is the regulation of national minorities. Nationalist discourse relies on an illusion of homogeneity within the nation. The very existence of national minorities, however, subverts any idea of a homogenous society. In Poland this is well illustrated by the government's refusal to bestow national minority status to the Union of People of Silesian Nationality. To recognize Silesian "nationality" would mean admitting that Poland is more than Polish.

The various stories in Tokarczuk's novel illustrate these ideas. She opens the novel by subverting gender through a genderless narrator. This subversion is carried further by the characters of Kummernis and Paschalis, both of whom take on attributes of the opposite sex. National identity is subverted in the character of Peter Dieter, a Silesian-German-Pole who lives and dies between borders. The idea of bounded nations also comes into question by setting the novel in such a contested, hybrid region as Śląsk. Ultimately, Tokarczuk's novel becomes a subversive work, revealing national and gender identities as unstable, arbitrary constructions.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 2002.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Introduction." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London ; New York : Routledge, 1990. 1-7.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York : Routledge, 1999.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy feast and holy fast : the religious significance of food to medieval women*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.

Gough, Val. "The Lesbian Christ." *Body Matters: Feminism, Sexuality, Corporeality*. Eds. Avril Horner and Angela Keane. New York: Manchester UP, 2000. 244-3.

Sikora, Tomasz. "Queering the Heterosexist Fantasy of the Nation." *The Nation of the Other: Constructions of Nation in Contemporary Cultural and Literary Discourses*. Ed. Anna Branahch-Kallas, Katarzyna Więckowska. Toruń, Poland: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2004.. 65-78.

Tokarczuk, Olga. *Dom dzienny, dom nocny [House of Day, House of Night]*. Wałbrzych: Ruta, 1999.