

GLOBAL FEMINISMS AND THE POLISH “WOMAN”: READING POPULAR CULTURE REPRESENTATIONS THROUGH STORIES OF ACTIVISM SINCE 1989

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Abstract

This article examines ten interviews with Polish feminist activists conducted by the Women’s Center “eFka” in Kraków and gathered by the Global Feminisms Project at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Employing intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches, it reads this collection in the context of Polish discourses on womanhood and femininity following the post-communist transition of 1989. The interviews offer a unique perspective on gender formations and invite us to think of the Other Europe beyond the clash of approaches to the region that have positioned it between the extremes of pre-1989 “communist oppression” and post-1989 “democratic freedom.” As the GF interviews make clear, although initially influenced by western gender theory, Polish women’s movements quickly crafted their own theorizations of patriarchy and the politicization of the private. Approaching the Poland Site interviews as examples of located oral histories shows that attention to women’s experiences and self-narrated stories of activism complicates the geopolitical contexts, historical accounts, and popular representations of feminism in the East and West.

Keywords

gender symbolologies, intersectionality, oral histories, post-totalitarian

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In his controversial and much publicized 2004 cartoon, "Polska wraca do Europy" [Poland Returning to Europe], Andrzej Mleczko comments on his country's revival after nearly half a century of Soviet political, economic, and cultural domination.¹ His Poland is anthropomorphized as a revolutionary female leading a crowd, a depiction that has a long tradition in his country and other parts of Europe. Nude, barefoot, and harried, Mleczko's Poland-as-woman is both traditional and transgressive: she struts her stuff while leading masses of men on a westward march to join the "civilized" nations of the European continent. Like the French Marianne, she holds the national flag. Unlike Marianne, she is being felt up by her countrymen (there are only three female figures in the crowd: a witch and two lugubriously smiling nuns) and seems to be enjoying it. Larger than any who follow her, Poland's ample body is a human battering ram, a vulgarized national symbol, and a sexual object. A bearded, wide-eyed Catholic god, sporting an aureole and clutching his head, looks down at this spectacle from the heavens.



FIG. 1 Andrzej Mleczko, "Polska wraca do Europy"

Mleczko's cartoon, no matter how trivial it may seem at first, provides a provocative representation of Poland's changing place in Europe by making clear the central role of women in the post-communist cultural, political, and social transition that has been taking place in that country since 1989. In blatant and hyperbolic ways characteristic of cartoon art, it suggests that gender and history, and to some degree even sexuality, must be key analytical categories in any reading of the many political uses and abuses of the representations of women's bodies and stereotypes of the feminine in Polish culture. By means of caricature, it also throws in sharp relief

what the eminent literary scholar, and one of the matriarchs of Polish feminisms, Maria Janion, terms the symbolic role of "Woman-[as] Freedom and [-as] Revolution" in European literary and visual culture imaginaries, a figuration of the feminine that "contains all the paradoxes of the creative process." Janion's claim that the concept of "woman" is based in the dual nature of what it symbolizes at the intersections of gender and history – the female is both the "creator of meaning and at the same time a concrete vessel for that meaning" (42) – suggests that women as creative agents and bearers of symbolic representations of the feminine stand at the center of the debate on national identity.²

Like the French Marianne, Poland-as-woman has been a symbol, indeed the meaning maker and its vessel, of the Polish nation during the times of hardship and moments of revolutionary and geo-political shifts. She inspired artists and resisters during the period of 18th-19th-century partitions of Poland and the time of its Soviet domination following World War II. Her images as mother, wife, nurse, and crone accompanied the many doomed uprisings of the 19th and 20th centuries; as comrade and laborer she appeared alongside brawny men in socialist-realist posters during the communist era; her ambivalent depictions in political and popular culture venues have illustrated the recent post-communist transition. While the patria-related notions of heroism, honor, freedom, and equality have been traditionally represented as masculine, Polonia, as she has been called, has signified the matria, or the nation's feminine qualities of homeland and hearth (Płatek 5-25). While Mleczko's cartoon riffs on these gendered histories and symbols, it also embraces the all-too-familiar objectification and fetishization of women's bodies and sexuality in Polish popular culture that accompanied their invisibility as social and political agents before and after 1989.³ Akin to the drawings of his American contemporary, Robert Crumb, Mleczko's depictions of women are "politically incorrect," to put it mildly. They are often shocking; to some they may seem crudely sexist and misogynist. Yet Mleczko's images have been an important part of Polish visual culture's landscape for generations; they have had wide circulation and considerable influence on, and are in many ways a record and reflection of, the changing Polish national imaginary before and after the geo-political caesura of 1989. The artist's long career and his deployment of gender (and often racial) stereotypes to illustrate momentous historical shifts demand serious studies of their own.

Far from being able to do that in the pages that follow, we use "Polska wraca do Europy" as a framing device for our discussion of the representations of women and gender relations in post-communist Poland as reflected in the ten interviews with Polish feminist activists that were conducted by the Women's Center "eFka" in Kraków, Poland, with whom the authors of this essay collaborated closely from 2002 to 2006. During that period, "eFka" conducted ten interviews with women whom they deemed to be most representative of "Polish feminist activism and scholarship," whose work and allegiances best traversed the spectrum of feminisms across regions,

generations, social classes, and ethnicities.⁴ Accessible to students and scholars through the gateway to the "Global Feminisms Project" (GF Project) at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan,⁵ these ten interviews provide the key archive for this essay. Poland was one among four sites comprising the GF Project, besides China, India, and the United States. Each site developed its list of interviewees independently, selecting on their own terms the issues and subjects that best represented aspects of their national histories and women's movement histories. Working at the intersections of the local and global, the collection of life histories from India, China, Poland, and the United States gathered in the GF archive offers scholars and students a nuanced understanding of the dense historical relations, and long history of mutually influential interactions among women's movements in and feminist scholarship from different countries and regions.

As part of the "Poland Site" team in the GF Project, the authors collaborated with the leaders of Women's Center "eFka," Slawka Walczewska and Beata Kozak, in ways that included observation and discussion of the interview process as it took place, close engagement with the transcription and translation of each of the videotaped interviews, review and sharing of each other's materials and thoughts on disparate ideas about the body, the public-private divide, the state, law and jurisprudence, and publishing that have emerged from the interviews. The historical frame of feminist thought and activism in Poland narrated in the ten "eFka" interviews stretch from World War II, through the communist rule and Soviet domination of Poland following 1944, to the period following the Round Table talks and first democratic elections in June 1989 that initiated the fall of socialist and communist governments all over Europe. These women's histories intersect strikingly with diverse institutions ranging from governmental bodies and forces, through underground dissident organizations, to religious organizations and injunctions. They reflect complex relationships with and reactions against these institutions while providing invaluable insights into individual women's daily negotiations of gender and representation as narrated by themselves.

While this essay relies on this rich archive of videotaped personal narratives, it also brings it in conversation with deliberately diverse and eclectic historical, literary, theoretical, and popular culture samples of material from Polish culture. Given the complexity of our subject, as well as our backgrounds as bicultural (Polish-American) and historically grounded scholars of literature, cultural studies, and feminist theory, we felt compelled to deploy an interdisciplinary analytical apparatus to shed some light on the intricate workings of gender and history within that elusive identity formation and set of cultural symbologies that can be named "Polish woman." Such an approach resonates with the mission statement of the Global Feminisms Project, which "by documenting individual life stories of activists and scholars, and considering them in their

particular historical and cultural contexts ... records important differences in women's activism in specific local sites, and questions constructions of 'global' feminism that assume a common (Western) set of issues as universal to all women." In particular, by privileging the voices of the interviewees, scholars, artists, and critics from Poland, many unknown in the United States and inaccessible to those who do not speak Polish, we forward another important goal of the GF Project, that is, "to question conventional notions of global feminism as the 'internationalization of the women's movement,'" an approach which may have expanded the understanding of feminism in the Third and Second Worlds, but "which often assumes a transfer eastward of western feminist ideals."⁶ As we hope to show through the Polish interviewees' life stories, these women's activism and scholarship give impetus to new readings of global feminist knowledge making.⁷

As we analyze the stories of feminist activism and scholarship gathered through the GF archive, we take into account the different, and often divergent, roles that images and meanings of "woman," "feminine," and "feminist" have played in the Polish national cultural imagination. Echoing Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of engaged feminist scholarship that reaches across borders of national and academic cultures, we situate our analysis at the intersection of personal, material, political, and theoretical vectors that propel these women's stories (190-96). We thus place the stories provided by the Polish feminists within the context of the print media and popular culture discourses about women that continue to circulate in postcommunist Poland. This approach allows us to interact with Griselda Pollock's theories of gender and visual culture as we interrogate historical stereotypes and images of Polish femininity and their impact on what Mohanty calls "'women' as material subjects of their own history" (23). The notion of femininity we explore here, then, does not reflect flesh-and-blood identities, but rather mirrors the dual role of the feminine in meaning making that Janion espouses, and what Pollock terms "a position within language and in a psycho-sexual formation that the term Woman signifies" (xvii). We analyze femininity as a "fiction produced within that formation" and "something of which its defining Other, masculinity, speaks, dreams, fantasizes" as it certainly does in the Mleczko cartoon (Pollock xvii). At the same time, we locate this fiction in the context of specific women's stories that map their lived experience as "Polish women" and that are located in the archive of the Global Feminisms Project.

The essay unfolds in three overlapping thematic blocks that interrogate the GF Poland site interviews in the context of historical representations of gender in twentieth- and early twenty-first century Poland. First, we offer an introduction to the relationships between symbolic feminine role models in Polish culture—to the "Polish woman" as Janion's meaning bearer or "vessel." Second, we examine the often paradoxical ways in which these roles have informed the representations of "woman" in diverse examples of post-World War II Polish popular culture that resonate with the GF interviews. Third, we highlight instances where these roles have affected women

as meaning makers and agents, where they not only clash with individual experiences vis-à-vis state institutions but also inspire survival strategies that have been employed and narrated by our subjects.

MAKING MOTHERS, VIRGINS, AND FEMINISTS: A MOSAIC OF FEMININE ROLE MODELS

The majority of symbols depicted in Mleczko's cartoon are recognizably Polish, yet some of them reflect the recent influence of western media on Polish popular culture – e.g., Poland's long-time political and cultural aspirations to be counted among the most "civilized" or "western" parts of Europe and its recent accession to European Union (hence the western direction of the march) or its governments' frequent support for and alignment with the US foreign policy, military interventions, and conservative social agenda on family values (hence the right-wing and militarized character of the marchers and the prominence of visibly Catholic religious leaders).⁸ At the same time, Mleczko's image is an example of a masculine "fiction" of "woman" located in a specific historical moment that must be read against the background of the post-Cold War rise of feminist movements in Poland. While these movements were to some degree influenced by western feminist theory and political practice, they were quick to craft their own theorizations of patriarchy and the politicization of the private.

For example, one of the GF interviewees, Joanna Regulska, a social scientist who divides her time between Poland and the United States, gives an apt example of how American inspirations for making the electoral process legible to women during the post-communist transition were folded into the efforts to reinvent that very process from the ground up:

We wrote a guidebook on how to win elections ... I initiated contacts with the American organization ... National Women's Political Caucus. We asked if we could use their materials, translated them and then made adjustments to Polish movements.... So we took it, did a translation, and kicked out all the American stuff, since we saw it was written for Americans, and we were creating this Polish reality.
(124)

It is such Polish feminist theorizations and their practical applications, indeed, the experience of living them, that are clearly muted and ridiculed in, but are also key to understanding the full context of Mleczko's cartoon.

"Polska wraca do Europy" appeared on the cover of the prestigious weekly political and cultural review magazine, *Polityka* [Politics] on May 1, 2004. Its date of publication on the day of

that socialist version of Labor Day – May Day – harmonizes with the image of a parade depicted by Mleczko, whose imagery recalls obligatory annual marches through towns and cities that were sponsored by the Polish United Workers Party prior to 1989. But May 1, 2004 also marked a momentous political, historic, and economic event that was antithetical to this collective Cold War memory: Poland's accession to the European Union. One of the interviewees in the "Global Feminisms Project," Agnieszka Graff, contends in her recent book, *Rykoszetem: Rzecz o płci, seksualności i narodzie* [*Stray Bullets: On the Subject of Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*], that the cartoon's appearance on the cover of Poland's major political publication confirmed the importance, if not centrality, of the issues of gender equality, power, and representation to that historic moment and its aftermath (76-77). Drawing on a rich archive of popular news media, Graff points to the proliferation of similar images on the covers of other publications as indicative of a specifically Polish version of an anti-feminist backlash in the country where "feminism has not existed as a powerful social movement," but where women's and gender issues have been historically of central importance (77).⁹

For instance, Barbara Labuda, who served as the Secretary of State in the Cabinet of President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, tells stories of the male-dominated Solidarity movement and describes her attempts at breaking the glass ceiling of that otherwise progressive independent labor union. Another interviewee, Małgorzata Tarasiewicz, reared in a multigenerational female-centered family that instilled in her a strong sense of independence, describes her activism in the light of her disillusionment with Solidarity's politics vis-à-vis its Women's Section during the post-socialist transition, her "huge disappointment about how this struggle with communism ended, in what kind of an imperfect way, so far from what I have imagined" (139). In the country where, despite all the progress in the wake of the accession to the European Union, the word feminism still draws a range of hostile responses, where attempts at cultural openness and respect for racial and ethnic diversity often fuel anti-Semitic and anti-black sentiments, and where openly sexist and homophobic reactions coexist with a nascent gay and lesbian activism, women like Labuda and Tarasiewicz emerge as pioneers who support women's independence, develop structures to uphold women's rights, and fight discrimination against ethnic and sexual minorities.

Like Labuda's and Tarasiewicz's, all of the Polish interviews in the GF Project show how their authors' histories of activism on the local level, in cities and voivodeships, intersect or clash with state-sanctioned policies, but also with movements and organizations from which one would expect sympathy for issues concerning women. They contextualize Polish women's struggle against the backlash discourses of the right-wing organizations and their followers, such as the nationalistic and fundamentalist Catholic program "Radio Maryja" [Radio Maria] or the racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic organization "Młodzież Wszechpolska" [The All-Polish Youth]. The interviews dwell

on the personal effects of what Bożena Umińska terms the “ethnic cleansing of the spirit” or the ways in which the state- and Catholic Church-sanctioned censorship of feminist, Jewish, and pro-lgbtq discourses in Polish politics and culture, profoundly complicate the understanding of both the geo-political contexts surrounding feminist movements and the personal stories involved in them (66). While Polish culture, history, and people have been sometimes cast in simplified binary terms, that is, as forever split between the dark era of post-1944 “communist oppression” and the brighter era of post-1989 “democratic freedom,” the women interviewed in our project offer public and private feminist histories of national and community activism that challenge such binaries.¹⁰

Labuda emphasizes that many women who were active in the anti-communist movement are still reluctant to identify themselves as feminists. One factor that may come into play, as the Polish-Jewish-American immigrant author and journalist Eva Hoffman explains, is that “the concept of feminism was corrupted by the former regime, by the ‘shop-window women’ of Communism, who were exhibited much like Potemkin villages to the unwary foreigners” (241). Writing from the United States, Hoffman is a returned immigrant, a visitor in her native Poland whose published account is a carefully edited travelogue of an outsider-participant. As the interviews with women like Uminska and Graff show, although with the advent of capitalism the images of ideologically correct Potemkin-village women have given way to the ultrafeminine models in glossies like *Glamour*, *Twój Styl* [*Your Style*], and *Elle*, the popular meaning of feminism has remained negative and reflects complex histories of sexism during and after communist era. It is true that some connotations of feminist today resonate in the United States – e.g., man hater, unnatural woman, dike/lesbian – but others are uniquely Polish and have been deployed trans-historically. For example, denoting meanings such as anti-(Polish) state, anti-Catholic, anti-(normal) family these new terms arise from both the legacy of communist-state manufactured illusion that women had completely equal access to politics and culture during the period of 1944-89 and from the more recent insistence of right wingers that they return to their “natural roles” as bearers of national cultures and barefoot-and-pregnant guardians of the hearth.

A brief note on language and gender might be helpful here. We include it to emphasize that much of what is key to understanding the workings of representations of female gender in Poland cannot be compared, seen through analogies, or translated without peril since, in contrast to English, Polish grammar genders all nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Most nouns denoting professional occupations like doctor, lawyer, or writer have their male and female counterparts that are marked by recognizably feminine endings (e.g., “prawnik” [lawyer] – “prawniczka” [female lawyer], “nauczyciel” [teacher]–“nauczycielka”). But as Graff points out, when the feminine ending is used, it often implies something not entirely serious, in most cases something lesser than its grammatically masculine counterpart (the example of “poet” vs. “poetess” in English

might be helpful here). On the other hand, there are numerous professions where the masculine ending virtually never appears. These are understood to be the "feminine" jobs, which require a lot of "care, patience, hard work ... and low wages" like nursing, childcare, teaching, and cleaning (Graff 35-36). In fact, the word "feminist" never appears in its grammatically masculine form in Polish as "feminista" but always as "feministka." Feminism has even been associated with murder: homemade signs, "feminism kills women," have been carried by participants in the so-called "marches for national tradition" that are sponsored by nationalist pro-life organizations. Given the relative absence of self-censoring among most publications in Poland, the term also invariably springs onto their front pages whenever words such as woman and freedom or equality, abortion, and minorities appear nearby.

Among these terms, "woman" or "*kobieta*" deserves an explanation across cultural and linguistic contexts, despite its apparent clarity. The terms "woman" and its Polish equivalent "*kobieta*" pose no apparent difficulty as far as nouns denoting a female of the human species are concerned. But when we take cultural connotations into account, the word in Polish requires explanation and contextualization in its attendant representations of femininity. Historically, there have been two basic, linguistically grounded, and closely interlinked ideologies of femininity that modify notions of woman, womanhood, and feminine in Poland. Though often unspoken, they resonate in all of the GF interviews. These ideological constructs bring together linguistic and visual representations of historically contingent gender in the way that Janion has posited it. As "creator[s] of meaning and at the same time ... concrete vessel[s] for that meaning" they reflect and are represented by the symbolic archetypes and iconographies of *Matka Polka*/Mother Poland and *Maryja Dziewica*/Virgin Mary (Einhorn; Płatek).

The first image, Mother Poland, goes back to the 18th century and the time when Poland did not exist on the map of Europe for about 150 years, following the partitions by Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The second, Virgin Mary, originates long before, with Poland's 1000-year long Catholic history and arises from the embroilment of that history with the development of the Polish state and its institutions (Zaborowska; Porter). *Matka Polka*/Mother Poland symbolizes women as guardians of the hearth, soldier-bearing wombs, and bearers of national culture, language, and "family values." Its shadow, *Maryja Dziewica*/Virgin Mary has stood for the unattainable, chaste, perfect femininity sanctioned by the Catholic Church. The resilience and plasticity of this formation, and its complex links with female sexuality and reproductive rights, are especially important for understanding today's clashes around femininity and feminism.

While somewhat familiar in the US through its counterpart of *Our Lady of Guadalupe* that was described poignantly by the late Gloria Anzaldúa, the Polish cult of the Virgin verges on goddess worship with specific political and practical results for the lives of ordinary women.

Mary was officially crowned the "Queen of Poland" by the authorities of the Catholic Church – Poland seems to be the only female divine monarchy in the world – and was proclaimed the nation's "Divine Mother." A feminist paradox incarnate, she is a monarch and a divine mother that everyone has to worship yet no one has to take seriously. She is the infinitely forgiving, passive, and merciful mother figure dreamt up by a patriarchal society in which all women are expected to be just like her: lovely visions to behold but never opinionated subjects. It is no accident that the right-wing radio station led by the anti-feminist, anti-Semitic, and anti-gay Father Rydzyk is named "Radio Maryja."

Both models, the Mother and the Virgin, have persisted, in various permutations, through the Cold War and capitalist transition. They continue to inform visual culture and are deliberately deployed by the propaganda machines of the Catholic church and conservative political organizations. Neither offers contemporary Polish women any help with envisaging full citizenship in the nation's post-socialist rebuilding. Both, given the intertwining of the most recent discourses of exclusion with the anti-feminist backlash under their auspices, exclude ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities.

OUR STORIES, OURSELVES: GROWING UP BETWEEN COMMUNISM AND (CATHOLIC) CAPITALISM

For women like Bożena Umińska, another of our interviewees, whose father changed their family's name from Keff to shield them from anti-Semitism, neither model offers a viable option – aside from their obvious restrictions - because both are Christian and nationalist.

Umińska told us that

various human institutions ... have this identity stamp, and they just stamp and stamp. And, for example, the Catholic Church stamps and says this: "You have a great Polish-Catholic identity, and simply everything is fine with you." Probably what's included is, I don't know, baptism, confessions, you know, offerings ... I don't know, everything, so, "you're great." And then it's called... what's it called? A true Pole, you know, and we have this nationalist and fascist with a great identity. (181)

Umińska has also offered a trenchant analysis of race and gender in 19th and 20th Century Poland when she examined an array of literary texts that depict Polish Jewish women in *Shadowed Figure: Jewish Women in Polish Literature*. She found that the double bind of gender and race, as Jewishness was then considered a race in roughly the same way it was in the US, constricted these women's lives because it more easily confined them to anti-Semitic stereotypes. In a more recent

collection of essays, *Barykady*, Umińska links her feminist activism to patriotism, whose duties demand unequivocal support for the civil rights of gays and lesbians from each responsible citizen: "as long as homophobia endangers Polish democracy, we are all gays and lesbians and should march out in the streets with them" (66). To this, the out-lesbian poet and writer Izabela Filipiak adds that, in Poland, sexuality and sexual object choice have become forms of passing, dissent, and contestation similar to ethnicity: "It may be that the lesbian is – along with her body and desire – the litmus test of what is up with culture today. ... [But] like Jewish women during the Second World War lesbians exist on others' papers ... they cross over to the Aryan side ... and like the best actresses enter the roles of a good auntie, devoted wife, social activist, businesswoman" (69).

The double burden of gender and sexuality to which Umińska and Filipiak point plays a constricting role for women like Anna Gruszczyńska, our youngest interviewee, born in 1978. Gruszczyńska's personal experience has led to local and national activism on behalf of Gay and Lesbian Rights. When Gruszczyńska was a graduate student of Foreign Languages and Literatures in Kraków, she came upon much resistance from a female professor for whom women's literature, let alone lesbian literature, was completely taboo and off-limits. Instead of continuing her research on the first lesbian novel published in Argentina, the professor insisted that Gruszczyńska study Spanish-Polish relations:

For the whole year, my mentor didn't even pronounce the word lesbian; if at all, she talked about "relationships between women," and she'd try to persuade me to ... I mean between the lines ... that if I really had to work on such an awful topic as women's literature, and the starting point was that women's literature didn't exist, then why did I have to focus on lesbians? If it had to be, be on women, then let them be normal women, heterosexual, and preferably in novels. (31)

Undaunted by this relegation of lesbian and women writers to the realm of the invisible, Gruszczyńska continued her scholarship and plunged into activism that included spearheading of the well known action, "Niech nas zobaczą" [Let Them See Us], that posted photographs of male and female same-sex couples on walls and billboards of Polish cities. To make this nation-wide action most effective, Gruszczyńska paid attention to Catholic religious holidays whose sequence dictates the rhythm of public and private life in Poland: "We did have some leaflet campaigns, right before Christmas," she recalls, "when, on a snowy day, we were giving out leaflets with the slogan "How Gay Men and Lesbians Spend Their Christmas" to remind everybody that gays and lesbians existed and had to take questions about grandchildren for Christmas (29).



FIG. 2, Anna Gruszczyńska, "Let Them See Us"

Recent scholarship on lesbian life stories (e.g., Anna Laszuk's *Dziewczyny, wyjdźcie z szafy!* [*Girls, Come out of the Closet!*]), the fallout of homophobia on Polish public life and popular culture (e.g., Zbyszek Sypniewski's and Błażej Warkocki's *Homofobia po polsku* [*Homophobia in Polish*]), as well as attempts to recast prominent literary works in the context of gay and lesbian biographies of their authors (e.g., Krzysztof Tomasiak's *Homobiografie* [*Homobiographies*]) gives us hope that things may change in the future. But for now, whether you are a Jewish woman, a feminist or a lesbian (or all of the above), or an atheist in the Poland dominated by Catholic values, your position as a real or true *kobieta* is contingent on a whole set of religiously and culturally prescribed functions. Like its counterpart of *Our Lady of Guadalupe* in Mexico, the Polish role model inspired by Catholic ideology and iconography that has put the Virgin Mary on a pedestal contributes strongly to the saintly and sacrificial role that many women feel they must follow to avoid alienation and isolation.

The other ubiquitous image of Polish womanhood, *Matka Polka* or Mother Poland, though neither virginal nor whorish, has long created a tight maternal box.¹¹ There is, of course, a direct link between the Virgin Mary and Mother Poland. Lech Wałęsa, the emblematic hero of Solidarity, has successfully employed feminine symbols to illustrate his social and political position. By wearing the badge with the image of the Polish Virgin, the famous Black Madonna of Częstochowa, in his lapel, he has been reminding Polish women, especially in their absence in the media, that

their role has been that of men's unwavering supporters, caretakers, and nurturers (Płatek). The image of Mother Poland as connoting these virtues emerged during the three partitions of Poland in the 18th Century, when nation building consisted of preservation of language, literature, Catholicism, and traditional gender roles in tandem with armed uprisings against the Russian rule. Though they often participated in resistance movements against the partitions, women were most welcomed as contributors to the nation insofar as their capacities for bearing sons-patriots-warriors were concerned. A model Polish woman who emerged from that period emulated the Virgin by being passive and self-sacrificing. A slave to her fertile body, she was nevertheless de-sexualized, and focused her energies first and foremost on bearing and rearing male saviors of and for the nation. In another gendered, romantic anthropomorphization, the partitioned and war torn Poland was at that time considered a "Christ of Nations" who would lead other beleaguered countries to freedom. So when one of her sons died on the battlefield, Mother Poland/Virgin sent another in his stead.

A curious version of this myth still thrives among conservatives and prominent right wing politicians as women who refuse, delay or are unable to bear children are represented by them as failures not only of motherhood but, indeed, of womanhood. Women who embrace their jobs and education, for example, rather than thinking of motherhood first, are often seen as threatening the very well being of the nation, at least according to the infamous former Minister of Education, Roman Giertych, who is part of the ultra right-wing Liga Polskich Rodzin or LPR [League of Polish Families]. Giertych and his ilk see feminists as something akin to what the American reactionaries term "femi-nazis," or as monsters who have to turn to work and lesbianism to bury their grief as unfulfilled females; who, supposedly unable to attract a man and bear children, attack and criticize men out of spite and certainly not out of any desire to fight inequality and gain political agency. Giertych's vision of Mother Poland overshadows even those women who do want to have children but have trouble conceiving and turn for help to modern reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization. These women are seen as unnatural which is often shorthand for feminist, because they demand that their treatments be covered by national health care plans the way such treatments are covered in other countries of the European Union.

In "Święte życie, święty lęk" ["Holy Life, Holy Horror"], an article that responds to the conservatives' control over women's reproductive rights, Graff argues against the Catholic church newspeak. This newspeak, she argues, has monopolized the discourse on reproductive technologies in Polish media and it equates in vitro procedures with abortion and those who turn to in vitro with baby murderers. Graff emphasizes the link between language, politics, and women's right to health care free of ideology: "We must regain another, forgotten language in Poland. In this language a pregnancy is called a pregnancy, an embryo – an embryo, and patients are spoken about with

empathy.... [This is] about the respect of the state for women's privacy and women's subjectivity, about supporting people's decisions in the realms of fertility and how to become parents." Graff ends her article with a dire prediction about the future of a country in which the Catholic Church prescribes the one and only way to have children: "[The ban on in vitro] will pass. One will have to travel abroad to undergo tests and procedures, and only the very wealthy will be able to afford it.... In religion classes, the in vitro children will become objects of persecution as having been conceived against the natural law."

In addition to the omnipresent Mother Poland, another important model of femininity that emerged after World War II is the Female Comrade. During the Cold War, communist ideology promoted camaraderie among ethnicities, classes, and genders. Feminism was not mentioned much, but existed in a socialist-realist form that required, as eFKa Director Sławomira Walczewska observes, a "dogmatic representation of women's movements in the spirit of the ideology of the state, the workers' state and class struggle to be exact, that is, as dramatically different from the bourgeois fancies of the ladies from the haves class" who first fought for women's suffrage and reproductive rights in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (11). In some important ways, feminism was itself a "foreign" word and concept associated with the West and capitalism. Indeed, according to state authorities, it had no right to exist in Poland at all because women were not discriminated against under communism (5). To some extent, it was an organizational force without the label of feminism applied to it because, as Hoffman points out, "like socialism, feminism was co-opted and corrupted by its association with official ideology" (80).

When Hoffman compares the US and Polish political systems, she elucidates important ways in which Polish and American women struggled with very different post-World War II cultural contexts. For one, there was no equivalent in socialist Poland of what went on in the US in the 1950s. There was no cult of post-World War II domesticity. This was due to the simple fact that women rarely, if ever, were able to be only homemakers in a country that lost so much of its population and that transitioned into state-sanctioned socialist culture in an almost single staggering leap after the end of World War II. There was no suburban isolation in Poland of the 1950s, no room for a homegrown "feminine mystique," because women were not expected, or allowed, to ponder their condition, as excessive introspection was considered a "bourgeois" pursuit. As Labuda points out in her interview, Communism equalized genders, at least in the public discourse and national imaginary, and women were expected to get an education and jobs just like their male counterparts: "Higher education was more discriminatory by class than gender—discriminatory, that is, against the upper classes—and women entered the professions in relatively large numbers, and reached high levels of authority, if rarely the highest" (Hoffman 81). But glass ceilings existed even in the midst of this socialist gender utopia: the Party allowed only

a specific number of women members in its ranks, while in the world of academia, where women had been more often educated than men, they achieved fewer academic titles and honors, not to mention prominence and visibility in the media (Sawa-Czajka 109).

Like among university presidents and public intellectuals, in higher echelons of the government women were objects of discussion and background images rather than active participants. The Central Committee of the United Polish Worker's Party (KC PZPR), Walczewska observes, was a "men only" body. During the forty odd years of the KC PZPR's existence, its seven secretaries general were all men (2005, 6). Regardless of the few gains made on the ground by Polish women during this period, however, it was still the only era in Polish history when gender equality was part of the ruling party's official agenda. Like racism, sexism was prohibited; the proliferation of both in private lives, on the job, in the jokes and popular discourse notwithstanding. As a result, one of the concepts that Polish feminists, as well as women who refuse that label, cannot understand is "feminine weakness," or any such notion of "passive, ornamental femininity, of the half-childish doll-like women" exemplified by Donna Reed-inspired images of white middle class American women (Hoffman 80). Given Lenin's and Stalin's opposition to the oppression of women under both feudal and capitalist systems (the former referred to domestic work as both unproductive and barbaric), so-called prerevolutionary gender roles were routinely ridiculed and repudiated in socialist realist popular culture as "bourgeois." In popular films, for example, especially during the height of Stalinism in Poland of 1949-1955, there evolved a model of behavior for the female part of the proletariat, what Piotr Zwierzchowski describes as the "pedestrian stereotype of a socialist realist she-hero ... the proverbial tractor driver, who personified the social ascendancy of woman" for the masses of movie goers (130). Engaged politically and socially, aware of ideological implications of their actions, such socialist heroes might fall in love and marry, but competed as equals against men who were part of the same work force. And yet, no matter that these women were represented as larger than life, as giantesses as Ewa Toniak describes them in her study of early socialist-realist visual culture, such depictions erased their sexuality and evoked curious fetishism, misogyny and abjection vis-à-vis the female body.

Amid other cultural and historic legacies of 1944-1989, it is virtually impossible to see Polish feminists in comparison to their white American counterparts of any "wave." In fact, if comparisons are to be made, Polish feminists who fought in the anti-Communist underground express views that seem much closer in political sentiment to those expressed by American feminists of color and Third World Feminists. One of the women Hoffman interviewed, for example, said this about gender cooperation in the anti-communist movement: "Well, you know, we've had all these problems we had to deal with together ... we've always had to struggle, and in some respects, we tried to help each other" (181). Still, as Labuda recalls her years as a Solidarity activist, when push

came to shove men saw women in very specific, that is, subordinate positions; female peers were more often asked to serve their male colleagues tea than to join their discussions as peers (69).

Residues of the archetypal communist Female Comrade have survived the transition of 1989 and complicate the images, which we have depicted thus far. The following fragment of a newsreel celebrating International Women's Day on March 8, 1953 illustrates well the extent to which communist ideology attempted to shroud the reality of women's lives during the Cold War; the extent to which it normalized gender equality and thus attempted to make all citizens take it for granted:

Constitutional Project of the Polish People's Republic, article 66: Women in the Polish People's Republic have equal rights with men in all respects of national, political, economic, social, and cultural life. Every morning all over Poland people rush to work. Women walk alongside men. Waclawa Durniewicz is a forewoman in the Kasprzak Factory in Warsaw. She gets satisfaction out of her work and equal pay. With a bright smile, she teaches her female colleagues. Helena Wytrwał has a different workday. She is the chair of her community's local council. There were no such chief village officers in prewar Poland. She is like Helena Olszewska who is the chairperson of the local committee of the United Polish Workers Party. She is one of the many women who have been entrusted by the People's Government with the care for her co-citizens. Fryderyka Niewiadomska, a female District Attorney, is also among them. There is noble competition among men and women in all walks of life. (*PRL Propaganda*)

In People's Poland, constitutional law, however, was not enough to guarantee gender equality. Polish women's everyday life was different from this rosy picture of communist camaraderie, as they carried the double burden of homemakers and professionals, few, if any, had the means to rise to prominent positions or free themselves from the workload that awaited them at home (Corrin; Bystydzieński). But, as Labuda suggests in the following fragment, at least theoretically, women could fully participate in the political and professional life of their country:

With all the criticism of that [communist] system, I nonetheless believe that it did something, that it caused the women's issue, the status of women, to be noticed and discussed, that social norms changed in Poland. And the situation of women in the Polish People's Republic, in my view, was decisively better than in France of the 60s and 70s. (69)

Between 1946 and 1989, women enjoyed benefits which have since disappeared from Poland's social map: free childcare, long paid maternity leaves (up to three years), and paid time off to care for sick children, not to mention state-sanctioned vacations, subsidized winter and summer camps for children, as well as workers' health resorts ("No Place to be a Woman 60). Abortion was legal and easily accessible, as was contraception, under socialized health care and so, unlike in France during the same period, Polish women had control over their reproductive rights. Not so after the fall of communism, when the pro-life forces of the Catholic Church and Solidarity got rid of these gains despite women's 50% membership in the anti-communist underground movement, and their vocal protests (Penn).

UNSPOKEN TRANSITIONS: BEYOND THE SOLIDARITY OF SILENCE

On March 15, 1993, the Law on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection, and Conditions of Abortion was approved by the upper house of the Polish Parliament, overturning the liberal 1956 legislation (David and Titkow 239). Now, Poland has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. As the Slavic Studies scholar Halina Filipowicz explains:

Many Western observers find it difficult to reconcile the political transformation of postcommunist Poland with Polish society's fierce and enduring attachment to traditional nationalist scripts.... However, the "transition narrative" crudely falsifies postcommunist developments. What emerged from the Quiet Revolution of 1989 in Poland was a highly traditional culture, rooted in religious fundamentalism, nationalist ideology and patriarchal practices. Seen in this context, the reluctance of many Poles to challenge the "hidden" taboo of particular forms of inequality (such as gender discrimination) as well as "unspoken" (yet still active) nationalist narratives becomes less puzzling.... When communism collapsed, a need for clear-cut identities of "us" and "them" became especially urgent, and a demand for scapegoats was (and still is) at its highest to feed the totalizing desire for order, stability, control.

Such a turn of events has led our interviewees to struggle even more fervently for women's rights. For instance, Tarasiewicz, the director of The Network of East-West Women, recalls that the end of communism was a bitter disappointment for her, despite her active role in its demise—a moment when "the [gender] blinders kind of started to fall off" (2003, 139). Like African American feminists disillusioned with the male heterosexist agenda of the Black Power Movement in the 1960, she realized in Poland of the 1990s that the struggle for end of oppression were understood

as masculine. To her, the transition of post-1989 meant that male Solidarity and Church hierarchies replaced the communist rule:

The news about my involvement in feminism somehow got around, and that's how I got my work in Solidarity, this next stage, already after 1989, when I became a coordinator of the National Women's Section, that is a person responsible for building this section from scratch. It was because ... even though there were many women in Solidarity—after all, many women worked for the underground and played exceptionally important roles—later on it turned out that there were no women in the union's leadership and that there actually was no single unit within the union that would represent women's issues. (140)

Tarasiewicz goes on to explain that Solidarity's bosses agreed to form such an organization only because of international pressure, which insisted that women's voices be more explicitly represented. Solidarity's leadership also did so in hopes that such a section would be more of a symbolic figure-head, another Potemkin village rather than an effective activist arm of the labor union. When it turned out that the women under Tarasiewicz's leadership demanded that changes be made and women's interests represented in the government, "the Women's Section reached the end of its life," as she recalled, "in a rather sudden and dramatic way" (140).

Solidarity, closely aligned with the Catholic Church, proposed a restrictive anti-abortion law, which the Women's Section opposed. When Marian Krzaklewski became the leader of Solidarity soon after, Tarasiewicz remembered, "he undertook steps toward repressing and dissolving the Women's Section" whose stance against the anti-abortion law threatened his position in relation to the Catholic Church (2003, 142). As a result, Solidarity dissolved the Women's Section and a "façade Section was created, consisting only of women from the right" (143).

Asked in an interview what it was like to be a woman in a position of power in Poland, the well-known Solidarity activist and later editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza* [Electoral News], the largest newspaper in democratic Poland, Helena Łuczywo, explained that it was "not any kind of a problem." She added that she "couldn't understand American feminists when [she] spent a year in the US" (Hoffman 49). Łuczywo admitted that women in Poland were in some ways worse off than their American counterparts – they had to wait in long queues after coming home from work to put food on the table, for instance – but she also thought that Poland offered women liberties not to be found in the West. She explained that there was a long tradition in Poland of "female activism and authority" (Hoffman 49). In recalling the 18th and 19th century Polish women's resistance movements, for example, Łuczywo linked women's participation in Solidarity to these earlier

uprisings and to the images of Mother Poland as a powerful cultural symbol. She acknowledged that even if women were deliberately held from direct positions of power in Solidarity, and later in the democratically elected government, women were able to develop "formidable examples of feminine strength." There was a common cause and it proved to be "a stronger force than the polarizing stereotypes of gender" (Hoffman 49). Unfortunately, when the communist system collapsed, many of the women who led to its demise "rejected any gender analysis, saying: we were all in it together, and we did what was needed, because it was the right thing to do," no matter that their hard work was not recognized, appreciated, or rewarded by their male colleagues (Grudzińska-Gross xii).

This unease with systemic gender inequality – no matter that Łuczywo suffered as a Solidarity activist who was not as visible as her male counterparts – is similar to the unease expressed by some activists of color in the Global Feminisms Project's U.S. interviews. Rabab Abdulhadi, for instance, advocates a complex gender analysis that addresses the victimization of Arab and Muslim men as well as women, which she finds necessary in the post-9/11 xenophobic atmosphere. As Abdulhadi observes, "women's oppression ... does not disappear with the targeting of men" (36). Likewise, Cathy Cohen recognizes that feminism needs to change so that it can "take into account other factors, or the intersection of race, then you have to kind of really think through a position on ... not a position on patriarchy, but the ways and contours, the nuances of patriarchy. How do we understand, for example, Black men's male privilege within a white supremacist or racist society" (128). However desirable such approaches are, in light of many of the GF interviews, it is rather revealing that men described in these interviews rarely make such pronouncements.

The women, who participated in and led the anti-government revolution in the 1980s Poland, went unacknowledged by the new government and their former Solidarity colleagues after 1989. As the interviewees in the GF Project like Labuda and Tarasiewicz made clear, this erasure did not bother many, including some of those it targeted or even hurt. At the same time, it served as a call to arms for others like the historian Shana Penn who documented women's work in the anti-communist underground. As the opening epigraph in her book, *Solidarity's Secret* (2005), Penn uses a revealing quotation from Labuda: "You've come to learn about Solidarity women, so I will tell you the truth, but who will care to publish it? Everyone in Poland knows that women started the 1980s underground, but no one bothers to talk about it."

As Penn observes, together with the Western press, male-dominated Polish society relayed a specifically male inflected portrayal of the revolution. As a result, virtually simultaneously with the so-called "birth of democracy," women activists were thrown out with the bathwater. It could also be argued that, caught between impossible gendered role models, seasoned independent trade

union fighters like Łuczywo or Anna Walentynowicz actually let themselves become invisible when their role in the national revolution went so blatantly unacknowledged (Penn). Helping to explain this paradox in the socio-historical context of lingering traditional gender roles and curious approaches to sexism, our "eFka" collaborator Sławka Walczewska stresses the power of yet another belief about womanhood in Poland, or the "notion readily spread among women that it is women who rule the world through men ... that HE may be the head of the family, but SHE is its neck" (2000, 11). According to this logic, women have power and stay invisible as power brokers; it also implies that men need to be led and manipulated by women.

The interviews collected in the GF archive give us a view of women's reality on the cusp of the twentieth anniversary of the momentous shift of 1989, whose public celebrations the Polish government is currently undertaking. The current cultural and political climate fosters an image of the ideal Polish woman that may be more recognizable to American readers than to former Solidarity activists. As numerous fashion magazines, TV ads, and domestic soap operas suggest not too subtly, the *kobieta*/woman of today is someone who remains a vessel of meaning, a male-made fiction by fulfilling men's needs: she has "that miraculous and dependable something" and devotes every moment to learning how to catch and nurture a man. These images are often imports from the west, true enough, but they also reflect lingering and resurgent stereotypes of the contemporary, sexed-up, and westernized Mother Poland.

These new incarnations echo both Mother Poland and the Virgin Mary, as the latter appears in more conservative publications and programs promoting family values, such as the aforementioned program "Radio Maryja," a weekly *Nasz Dziennik* [*Our Daily*], or in more genteel versions in the recent chick-lit hit by Malgorzata Kalicinska, *Dom nad rozlewiskiem*, and a TV program for children *Ziarno* [Seed]. The proliferation of these female fictions and figurations, their complex historic roots, as well as hybrid character in contemporary systems of gendered significations do not go unnoticed in more progressive publications, such as *Gazeta Wyborcza's* magazine *Wysokie Obcasy* [*High Heels*], or *Polityka*, and in academic feminist circles where some of the most trenchant gender analyses now take place.

Twenty First Century heterosexist fantasies are particularly jarring in the context of what has only recently emerged in Poland as a topic of public debate – domestic violence and its relation to gendered systems of power. Ironically and tragically, it is this new attention to an age-old problem, and de facto systemic covering up of women's victimization by state institutions and the media, that allows for a widening of gender analyses in public discourses to include men and masculinity. As our interviewee, the social worker Anna Lipowska-Teutsch, recalls, her advocacy for abused and battered women was discouraged and cost her her job. Initially aware of feminism only from stories of western activists, she felt in the 1980s that it had no place in Poland. But then she heard terrifying

stories of violence against women as the women themselves related their experiences to her: "These were women who showed up in the Acute Poisoning Clinic after suicide attempts and who had suffered some inhuman kind of abuse by their husbands, fathers, brothers, boyfriends and so on for many years. And finally they tried to take their own lives, because for many years, they had been seeking help, trying to escape, trying to get some protection from the law, trying really hard" (2005, 97). Women's accounts made Lipowska-Teutsch embark on activism that radically changed her outlook and that revealed to her the interlocking systems of male dominance between the private and public spheres. She was shocked and outraged that no one listened to these women's cries for help, that there were no institutions where they could turn for protection and understanding. Between the home and the state institutions designed to protect all of Poland's citizens, battered women had no place and were invisible. Most of all, Lipowska-Teutsch was amazed that many of these women internalized their invisibility and victimized status, as they blamed themselves for their abuse and saw suicide as the only option in a culture that expected and rewarded female sacrifice. One woman, a Catholic from the countryside, drank poison that would ensure she would die slowly, so that, while in agony, she could still undergo confession and gain absolution to ensure that she would go to heaven. For years, this woman was abused by her husband, who also molested her children; she lived through it all "with no result but silence and loneliness" (98). She died in a horrifyingly painful way but, as Lipowska-Teutsch emphasized, she tried to be "a good Catholic," to "save" herself in the afterlife by enacting in her death models of feminine sacrifice disseminated by the Catholic Church. This woman was certainly comforted by her deep faith and prayer, but she was just as certainly a victim of the culture and state that did not recognize her as a fully-fledged citizen and political subject. She died locked in a trap that was, ironically and tragically, set up and sanctioned by the discourses and institutions that embraced both the Mother and the Virgin models of womanhood, the models that were to secure her a good life on earth and a certain passage into an even better afterlife.

To compound the bitter irony of the lessons learnt through stories such as this one, Lipowska-Teutsch discovered that more often than not the role of the victim precluded the victimized woman from identifying herself as a feminist. The organizations that came on the scene during the 1990s to help battered women expected only the "classic" or "good victims," or those who deserved "to be believed and to receive help" mutely. Women who would "embrace a sense of empowerment and demand [their] rights," who would identify with a larger group to defend their place in the world, had little or no credibility:

Here you are, dear ladies, here you have these suffering women, these women who are tortured, raped, killed, abused, who die, and take care of them, you know. Well,

there is something about this that makes you talk about these women. It's a bit like a sound of a nail scratching a board, you know. There is something kind of tactless about this. This kind of showing ... flaunting of this ... this suffering. There is this talk about some kind of negative effect of the victim's feminism, this kind of showing the stigmata and baring the wounds, and that, on the other hand, feminism slides down into this kind of hole, where all well-meaning people meet and they want to help somebody, you know. But that kind of dulls the blade, let's say, the political blade of feminism and focuses on the universal suffering of a human person. (98)

As another interviewee, Barbara Limanowska, found out, she could become active on behalf of women victimized by human trafficking only by leaving Poland. Limanowska felt that she could not limit her activism to Poland, whose system and institutions she found constricting, even if she first embraced feminist consciousness while a university student there. Limanowska worked for the LaStrada Foundation, which allowed her to use her links with her home country and Eastern Europe, as well as with Asia and the West. Still, her international activism was inspired by what she sees as a distinctly localized feminist perspective: "We had this idea to go beyond the 'first world,' beyond the language and methodology, which kind of reflected Western feminist imagination, to look at it from some Eastern vantage point, and to try to describe this phenomenon, to work on it kind of... from the inside, from our perspective, without appropriating... or ... or accepting the language, which, as we felt, didn't quite reflect what was really going on in trafficking" (88). On the other hand, for Anna Titkow, her feminism as a scholar of sociology and gender became confirmed only after her work had been included in the famous collection, *Sisterhood Is Global*, and after Robin Morgan told her that this publication already defined Titkow as a feminist. That was so, Titkow pointed out, because for her generation of women in Poland, the ones who are now in their sixties, the label of feminist could come only after having created a sense of a gendered self, after having developed what we would call a feminist self and story (149).

Remembering her own troubled road to feminist consciousness, literary scholar Inga Iwasiów, points to the complexities of exploring issues of gender and representations across cultures and languages that have inspired this essay. Iwasiów emphasizes that she was a feminist "since preschool" given her independence and strong-mindedness. It was in fact her repressive upbringing and education in the socialist Poland of the 1960s and 70s that gave her the first tools for gender analysis. Iwasiów saw her past and her road to her feminist self as framed with performances of womanhood, gendered gestures and a specific setup that accompanied her education at that time, which was also, as she came to see it later, the "pinnacle achievement of patriarchy." This was so, as Iwasiów explains, because

the feminized teaching profession didn't guarantee that one would be in a space beyond patriarchy. Just the opposite, all these gestures performed there, this whole framing that accompanied education in the 70s and the 80s were, of course, top achievements of patriarchy, and in its communist version, there was, of course, some place for girls. It wasn't clearly specified which place exactly it was, but it was clear that one could hold a red flag and perform at a school assembly." (46)

It was in those performative moments, while a decorative element in political spectacles, that Iwasiów realized both her private "objectification as a girl" and her political "insightfulness" that later enabled her to voice her opinions as a scholar. It is on this intersection of the private and political meanings of woman, feminist, and feminine that we would like to bring this essay to its conclusion. And by way of an apt conclusion, let us offer an image of Polish womanhood that can confront Mleczko's cartoon with which we opened this essay.

Working with photography and socialist realist architecture, multimedia artist Zofia Kulik, who came of age in the 1970s, echoes Iwasiów's sentiments in "Self Portrait with the Palace." In this piece that was made entirely by hand, using traditional photographic and collage techniques, Kulik uses her own nude image to map out male and female bodies as fissured meeting places for gender and history. "Self Portrait with the Palace" both deconstructs and



Fig. 3, Kulik, "Self-Portrait with the Palace" (1991)

disrupts the proliferation of monumental religious, political, and gendered symbols that represent Polish national identity during and after the Cold War. While doing so, it gestures ironically and powerfully toward the historic contexts we have examined through the interviews with Polish feminist activists: from the iconic Mother Poland and Virgin Mary, through the Communist Comrade, to the Super-Feminine Chick of today.

Bridging historic periods and generations, Kulik represents the wave of feminist artists who contended with a peculiar form of gendered internal exile in the world of the arts under and after communism, during the height of socialism in Poland and during the height of nationalist and religious frenzy unleashed in its aftermath. We see her work as positioned on the crossroads, in the uncensored space of creative practitioners and intellectuals, and as offering by means of a visual narrative a story of female resilience that is akin to those told by the GF Project interviewees we have examined in this essay. The woman at the center of "Self-Portrait with the Palace" is the Polish anti-Madonna and phallic anti-Virgin, at the same time as she can be read in dialogue with the depictions of *Our Lady of Guadalupe* by Chicana artists like Alma López, because the story that she tells cuts across multiple idioms and cultures. And as much as the woman in Kulik's image is imprisoned by the national religious and political symbols, imperilled by the spire of the upside-down Palace, she is also central and commanding attention; she is a formidable goddess with whom no one would want to mess.

Like the images and stories included in the *Nieoczekiwane Archiwum Kobiet* [*The Unexpected Women's Archive*], a catalogue from the ground-breaking multimedia exhibit, "Polka: Medium – Cień– Wyobrażenie" (2005) [Polish Woman: Medium – Shadow – Vision], that brought together feminist scholars, artists, and activists, Kulik's image suggests a choral vision and a collage of voices that comprise the Polish feminine. And that is why the image of Kulik's socialist realist goddess that clearly anticipated and inspired *The Unexpected Women's Archive* is a perfect visual homage to the women whose stories constitute the Global Feminisms' archive and who inspired and inform this article. It is also a perfect answer to the cartoon by Mleczko with which we have opened it: you have to listen to the stories and voices that animate the pictures. They defy neat narratives and historical categorizations, escape theory, and challenge disciplinary divisions. As is the case with all the stories gathered in the Global Feminisms archive, we learn from them one woman, one voice, and one listener/reader, at a time.

NOTES

- 1 Andrzej Mleczko is best known for his political drawings. He is the author of thousands of cartoons and drawings published in dozens of newspapers and magazines over the past forty years. For more information on the artist and his work, see the web site of the Andrzej Mleczko Gallery at <<http://mleczko.interia.pl/andrzej-mleczko>>.
- 2 This issue opens up a fertile ground for engagement with the rich US scholarship on this subject. We choose not to follow this lead and focus instead on the voices of Polish women featured in our primary archive.
- 3 Our purpose in this paper is not a detailed account of women's history in Poland, but rather an interdisciplinary and cultural studies-inflected unpacking and contextualization of some of the notions of womanhood and the feminine that are employed by the interviewees whose stories comprise the Poland Site Global Feminisms Project archive.
- 4 "eFKa" (Fundacja Kobięca) Women's Foundation is a feminist organization, founded in March 1991, whose main goal is to support solidarity and independence among women, to counteract discrimination against women, and to develop women's culture. See <<http://www.efka.org.pl/en>>.
- 5 The "Global Feminisms Project" was funded, beginning in 2002, by a grant from the Rackham Graduate School, with additional funding provided by the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, the Women's Studies Program, and the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Global Feminisms Project's detailed description, interviews with feminist scholars and activists from China, India, Poland, and the United States, as well as transcripts, contextual and bibliographic materials can be found on the Project's web site at <<http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem>>. So far, the archive has been used by many scholars and students, and has provided a basis for several courses on global feminisms at the University of Michigan and other institutions.
- 6 23 Sept. 2009 <<http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem/en/about.html>>.
- 7 Although aware of the emergent scholarship on this subject in the US, we choose to focus on the voices of Polish activists included in the Global Feminisms Project and rely on the work of Polish feminist scholars, most of whom publish in Polish only, as our primary sources. We do so to offer a perspective that is rooted in between the US and Polish academe theoretically, but that brings to the table primary and secondary sources that may be unavailable to readers with no command of Polish.
- 8 As a Catholic country, Poland has been read as a culture awash with conservative religious symbologies and its nationalisms as directly related to the hegemonic social role of the Catholic Church and conservative family policies associated with its power and influence. See Porter 2000 and 2001.
- 9 With the exception of the Polish GF interviews and unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

- 10 Many scholars of Eastern Europe have been critical of the effects of the postcommunist transition on women and they also reject such binary terms. See Funk and Mueller; Einhorn; Gal and Kligman.
- 11 While scholars like Einhorn and Piątek analyze these stereotypes, they, and others, have also traced many ways in which these images and dictates have been contested and resisted by Polish women. See Jolluck and Fidelis.

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