

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Inga Iwasiów
Interviewer: Beata Kozak**

**Location: Szczecin
Date: December 2003
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Acknowledgments

Global Feminisms: Comparative Case Studies of Women's Activism and Scholarship was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The project was co-directed by Abigail Stewart, Jayati Lal and Kristin McGuire.

The China site was housed at the China Women's University in Beijing, China and directed by Wang Jinling and Zhang Jian, in collaboration with UM faculty member Wang Zheng.

The India site was housed at the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) in Mumbai, India and directed by C.S. Lakshmi, in collaboration with UM faculty members Jayati Lal and Abigail Stewart.

The Poland site was housed at Fundacja Kobiet eFKa (Women's Foundation eFKa), Krakow, Poland and directed by Slawka Walczewska, in collaboration with UM faculty member Magdalena Zaborowska.

The U.S. site was housed at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan and directed by UM faculty member Elizabeth Cole.

Graduate student interns on the project included Nicola Curtin, Kim Dorazio, Jana Haritatos, Helen Ho, Julianna Lee, Sumiao Li, Zakiya Luna, Leslie Marsh, Sridevi Nair, Justyna Pas, Rosa Peralta, Desdamona Rios, and Ying Zhang.

Undergraduate student interns on the project included Alexandra Gross, Julia MacMillan, Libby Pozolo, Shana Schoem and Megan Williamson.

Translations into English, Polish and Chinese were provided by Kim Dorazio, Cheng Jizhong, Kasia Kietlinska, Justyna Pas, Alena Zemanek, and Ying Zhang.

Technical assistance was provided by R. Thomas Bray, Dustin Edwards, and Keith Rainwater. Graphic design was provided by Elisabeth Paymal.

The project was initially supported by a University of Michigan Rackham Interdisciplinary Collaboration Research Grant. Additional support was provided by the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, International Institute, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Women's Studies, Humanities Institute, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Herman Family Fund, the Center for African and Afro-American Studies and the Office of the Provost at the University of Michigan.

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Inga Iwasiów was born in Szczecin, Poland in 1963. She has a doctorate in feminist theory and literary criticism from the University of Szczecin where she is currently Professor of Literature and an editor of a cultural bi-monthly *Borderlands (Pogranicza)*. In 1994, she published a monograph, which is considered one of the first books in feminist theory and criticism in Poland. Iwasiów writes academic texts as well as prose and poetry and is deeply committed to feminist language not only as an academic tool of interpretation, but also as a daily form of communication. She has two sons and lives in Szczecin.

Beata Kozak studied German and Slavic Literatures at the University of Poznan, Poland and in Bonn, Germany, where she spent six years. Kozak returned to Poland in 1995 and began her work with the Women's Foundation eFKa. Along with Walczewska, she co-edited the first Polish feminist magazine *Pełnym Głosem (In Full Voice)* and, since 1999, she has been Editor-in-Chief of the feminist quarterly *Zadra (Splinter)*.

Inga Iwasiów
December 2003
Szczecin

Beata Kozak: Inga Iwasiów is a literary studies professor at the University of Szczecin. She is also an editor-in-chief of the cultural bi-monthly *Pogranicza (Borderlands)*, published in Szczecin. In 1994, she published a book *Frontiers in Włodzimierz Odojewski's¹ Work: A Feminist Interpretation*, which is one of the first books in feminist literary criticism. Inga, could you, please tell us about your childhood?

Inga Iwasiów: This is one of the harder questions because when we want to talk about childhood, we actually tend to arrange it into some kind of a plot, which isn't necessarily true. The most common would be the psychoanalytical plot, so now I should find something in my childhood that could work as a starting point, as a moment of trauma, or the moment of some exceptional enlightenment or illumination from which I could start the story. By the way, I don't like talking about my childhood. Perhaps I don't like childhood; I believe childhood to be one of the worst periods in a human life. Similarly, by the way, I consider my children's childhood as a traumatic period in their life, this time, because of me, of course. So talking about my childhood, I never know whether I'm telling about what I remember, or about what I think I should remember, or about what comes out of the psychoanalytic plot, or, finally, about what comes out of my role as a literary critic, who has read lots of childhood plots for the last several years. It's necessary to understand literature created by people born in the 60's. After all, I myself was also trying to write about my own childhood, or rather about some mere crumbs of it. Therefore, I would probably need to order it all somehow. My childhood was in the 60's, but what I remember from these years are actually only some crumbs of unpleasant experiences. Particularly, it's preschool as an institution of repression, I'd like to say, and there is something to it. As for preschool, I remember flights, dramatic flights, down the stairs that seemed terribly steep to me. Today I know that there were only five steps. I was running to mom, who worked nearby, in the City Offices, so... this preschool was located at the Red Army Street. Of course, it's not saying anything to anybody from outside of Szczecin, but it's the same part of the city where the City Offices are located. I was trying to flee and get to mom, and during one of these flights, I remember, or maybe I only imagine it, that I almost got run over by a car. The driver, who had jumped out of the car, slapped me on the butt really hard. I think I wet my panties, and this could be the traumatic childhood story. But I remember this; I think I remember this. And it isn't fun. I remember being fed with soup, and particularly with milk soup, at this preschool, to which I was allergic, to dairy, as it turned out later. And the Ice Queen, a teacher there, who was my mother's friend, and took care of me exceptionally well by tormenting me overtime. So these are monstrous memories, which don't come across at family pictures, of course, since pictures from this preschool show a beaming and pretty girl I was at that time. I was perhaps very shy, as far as I'm able to remember, even though there were two forces tugging at me. One was the need to dominate, to get attention, and to constantly be on stage, which has perhaps stayed with me, to

¹ **Odojewski, Włodzimierz:** writer, radio script-writer, journalist, and recipient of many literary awards. He was dismissed for political reasons from his post as Director of the Contemporary Theatre Studio of Polish Radio and left Poland to take up scholarship at the Berlin Academy of Literature in 1971.

some extent, till today, but this force was constantly struggling against another force, that of terrible shyness, lack of self-confidence, and tendency to hide, to disappear, behind others. So this is what I remember from day care; this somehow dominates my memories of the 60's. So it must have been incredibly important. In those times, my father worked outside of Szczecin, and that's another part of these memories. Another thing that's vivid in my memory is my father's visits. He worked in little towns close to Szczecin, so it wasn't at the end of the world, but we didn't see each other every day, so father's visits home and my trips to see him were like some kind of a holiday, which somehow I remember in terms of packing a small suitcase. But how many of these visits there were, how often – in conversations with my parents, I never went back to these facts. At any rate, in my first memories, father appears as somebody to miss, somebody to love very much, somebody nice to touch, and out of these visits, trips and meetings, I also remember that it was a great holiday to lie down near father in bed, when he was at home, exceptionally, for a week-end. It's interesting that in these first memories, I remember mother much less, apart, of course, from the fact that I was fleeing to get to her. But I remember father more physically as an absent person, but at the same time with some nice associations. And these were the 60's, which means my early childhood, which most likely is more of a projection evoked by a tape, a photo album, and these crumbs. The conscious time, on the other hand, is the 70's, or the seeming affluence of the 70's. This, in fact, is my basic experience. This is when all the stories began, which later were actually very important in my life. First of all, perhaps even before I started school, I had started learning how to play the piano, and actually these piano lessons were very important to me, the way I see it today, particularly because I was the only person who had her own teacher. I mean it was a close relationship: the instrument, he and I, and not, for example, like English lessons, which I also remember as a terrible experience of being there with thirty other children and some scary guy screaming something to me in an unknown language. And this became a pattern in my life. I mean if there are thirty people and I don't know something well, I can't cope, but when I'm by myself with somebody and an instrument, I can play it better, of course, and I begin to dominate. Actually, this motif of piano lessons, and particularly my relationship with the teacher was one of the more important experiences of my life, described, by the way, in a short story, because this man, deceased today, had MS, which actually came up gradually, after five or six years of my lessons with him. He was a very strict teacher. Later on, the disease pushed him into states that were actually pathological. He tortured me a little bit, but our relationship was so strong by then that I didn't mind. Just the opposite, I was actually going to these music lessons, to get my portion of humiliation, with great pleasure. And I actually continued these lessons even in high school for a while. Actually, because of the fact that he was sick and wasn't able to have regular hours in the music school, I wasn't going to the music school but took private lessons from him. And later, actually, as his disease was progressing, it all turned into something very important and very difficult, from which I finally escaped. And if, inadvertently of course, some psychoanalytical plot is emerging... but if I have a dream, which is very important to me and which keeps recurring. It is a dream, in which I'm walking, and he lived at this very small side street in the center of the city... in which I'm walking to his place, on this street, passing various familiar places in the city, and I'm thinking that I will keep attending these lessons. It's too bad he's sick and I can't watch it any more. It's too bad he can't walk and actually can't play by himself but only pinches me maliciously from time to time, but I'll go anyway, I should. This dream sometimes has further developments, like that I enter the apartment, I'm walking upstairs for a very long time, I'm talking to him, I'm explaining why I have been away for so long, but he's actually not saying anything. He's just

there, in the depths of his shabby apartment. And the truth is that I actually escaped from these lessons. I mean at some point, I stopped going without actually explaining to him why I was doing it. He died after about a year, I think.

BK: What was this torture about? Is it a metaphor, or was he literally torturing you?

II: One could say he was permanently violating my dignity. I mean he was a strict teacher; he believed I was talented and lazy. He was right, of course. Of course, he would order me to play the same fragments forever, but these would be silly stories, since this is more or less what learning to play any instrument is about. He probably was doing something that was about invading my intimacy. I mean he kept touching me all the time. One thing I remember from these times is, well, my first bra, which... the buckle of which... he was playing with it through my blouse. I wouldn't call it sexual molestation, to use today's language, because that probably wasn't the point in all this. The point was that he was lonely and that he actually lost control over his life, and by doing things to me that he knew were hard for me, he perhaps gained back some control over the world back. That's how I would explain it today. I was his last student. Also, he would read newspapers and later ask me if somewhere, at the so-and-so street, there was, in fact, a huge pot hole, as they were saying in the *Szczecin Courier*, and did I see it? If I didn't see it, I was indicted and punished in a sense, not literally, of course, and he didn't order me to kneel by the piano and didn't whip me. But his strict aversion, his malice, and literally his pinching me while I was playing the piano were some forms of a sadistic pay-back. There was something like this in it. But, of course, I don't need to add that it was my first infatuation, that he was somebody incredibly important to me, and also somebody who was somehow erotically important to me specifically during my childhood, since this story certainly belongs to the period of childhood and later to the period of puberty.

BK: Elementary school lasted seven and not eight years in the 70's.² Did something happen as early as in elementary school that you could describe as a slow process of getting closer to feminism?

II: Of course, from my perspective today, it'd be possible to look at it that way. This means, above all else, a feeling of alienation and rebellion of an individual not adjusted to an institution that school was, and school in the 70's certainly was more repressive than contemporary school, and more orderly, on the other hand. So I remember that I kept disliking school. The same story: the way I didn't like day care, I didn't like school, either, even though I was a very good student. I was also faring quite well because my parents... and this is also an important aspect, important for me today, I mean my descent, and that is the fact that my father is a watch-maker and mother a nurse, so I was actually a child of a working class, being socially advanced. That's how it could be described. So we were doing quite well, and because of that I might have had a slightly nicer school uniform, ironed more carefully, and I always had sandwiches with something good, but it didn't mean that... that it wasn't a basis for my feeling bad or being alienated in class and in school, which was located at one of the main streets in the city, and because of this, it was a school for lower classes, as we'd say today, rather than for some kind of elite, an inner-city

² At first, the Polish national school system consisted of 7 years of elementary school followed by general high school or trade school education. Then the system changed to include 8 years of elementary school followed by high school or trade school.

school, to say in short. I felt bad there, for some reasons, which were personal reasons. I couldn't understand rigor and coercion. Since first grade, I was singing in a school choir, and that's a continuation of my musical life traumas, but, in fact, the conductor of this choir, a lady who taught music, could show up in a dream about cruel teachers. She would also do as a heroine in film scenarios about this topic. By the way, she was a beautiful woman with sophisticated manners, which she was trying to teach us by pulling our ears. I also remember that since first grade, I couldn't live up to her expectations about some aesthetic requirements. Well, she had this habit that every year, during our second class, she would check our notebooks, and it was the first trauma. Because I couldn't, of course, make the right cover for this notebook, it wasn't as beautiful as it should have been. Even if I had the prettiest cover paper, the notebook always looked sloppy. This trait has stayed with me till today, but the best thing – I'll make a leap here to my sons' childhood – is that I have recently talked to the younger one and he has told me that in kindergarten, he was really suffering because his alphabet box was the most badly made. But, of course, not much has changed in this respect, and my manual and artistic skills have remained as controversial as they were during the time of my childhood. So we'll remember once and for all my notebook then and his box, as horribly glued together, smeared with glue, and somehow repulsive. So I would fail the notebook exam but later I still had to live up to a lot of her expectations, because I had the best ear for music and I was the most advanced in this hopeless piano-playing, so during school assemblies I had to perform the Dąbrowski Mazurka³, and later on I had to sing in three parts in this choir, because it was an ambitious choir, and I was getting awards at some school choir contests for singing patriotic songs. I had to perform in this costume, which didn't seem to bother other children, but it would seem strangely sticky to me. It seemed to me, as I'd say today, repressive, but then I didn't know what bothered me about it. Maybe it was that my legs were too skinny for white tights, but there was something there that was crushing me, anyway. And actually, I can't say how it was, whether I lost my ear for music, but I certainly lost my voice. It's hard to talk about a girl's voice change, but I think it was a psychological change. Around grade seven, I practically refused to go on. I mean my reactions to performing and expectations posed for me in relation to this overwhelmed me to the extent that I started faking a strep throat, or perhaps I really got a strep throat. And I got a doctor's note that I wasn't allowed to sing in a choir. I was very happy and, at the same time, I started my recitation career. It seemed to me that it would be some revenge on that teacher when, instead of singing in her choir, I would beautifully recite poems on the same school stage. My recitation career is perhaps important again, because while I didn't feel good in the choir, most likely because I wasn't visible, I felt wonderful reciting poems. I had this sense of ruling over the room. Of course, this rule was institutional again, because nobody would have wanted to listen to Broniewski's⁴ poems if not for the school discipline. What's interesting, this was also the time for my brief career in the artistic group of a military unit, very well-known today. Then it was the 12th Regiment of Mechanized Infantry, and today it's the 12th Corps, the one serving in Iraq. So I belonged to the artistic troupe of this unit. I didn't feel bad among soldiers I have to say [laughter]. But I did feel bad in school and actually got in some sort of trouble all the time. At one time, I wrote in a paper that my class was like some ignorant, anonymous mob of antisocial individuals, and in another, I wrote that life made no sense and I liked autumn because it was sad. At any rate, I was incredibly exalted and inclined to experience all kinds of radical

³ **Dąbrowski Mazurka**: officially recognized as the Polish national anthem in 1926.

⁴ **Broniewski, Władysław** (1897-1962): a poet representing Polish revolutionary lyricism and a soldier and participant of the Polish-Bolshevik war. He was a recipient of many military honors.

emotions, mostly for show, because, on one hand, I was very introvert, of course, and still am, but on the other hand, I knew how to act out such substitute spectacles, quite extravert, actually.

BK: But, at the same time, you held some responsible functions, since you were a president of...

II: Of the Student Congress...

BK: ... of the Student Congress.

II: Yes, I was a President of the Student Congress, I was this main person for reciting poems, and I was managing school assemblies. The sweet revenge came when I was also managing choir auditions as a host. Then, I could, of course, look with superiority at the choir, this place of my misery and of these terrible practices I didn't have to worry about any more. And I was dressed differently from all the others.

BK: After elementary school, you went to a high school, which was just a few houses down from where you lived.

II: Yes, I came closer, but it's actually possible to say that all of my life is about moving in the trajectory around my birth place. I lived at Piast Avenue., one of the longest streets in Szczecin. This is also the street where Elementary School 8 was located, and so was my high school. Today, I also work on the same street, because the university is located there, in the former military garrison. I jumped aside for a while, but no more than a ten-minute walk away, because the Polish Studies Institute used to be located elsewhere. So it's possible to say that I'm tied to... close to the place both symbolically and literally. So I did start attending this high school, which enjoyed a good reputation, most likely also because the gloominess of the building reflected the standards of their pedagogy. So it was, in fact, a rigorous school although in these days this rigor was letting up a bit everywhere, in all schools. But it was a school where again... from which I have no good memories again, just like from other educational episodes. And I'm trying to be honest with myself. Even during our 20th high school reunion, which happened two years ago, I didn't try to persuade myself and talk to my friends as if school was a great time, and it's such a pity it's all over, and it was so much fun, and do you remember when so-and-so was doing this-and-that. No, actually, I'm not trying to make this memory better, or to sugar-coat it. I believe that it was also quite decisive for me, just like the others. It was decisive in this kind of a process of formulating a slightly anarchistic worldview I have today. I mean, above all else, that school for me was the institution exerting pressure I wasn't able to manage. By the way, I attended a class with a focus on math and physics⁵ while since childhood I was talented in humanities. Starting with the second semester of my sophomore year, math was actually completely incomprehensible to me, and physics was so starting in the middle of my freshman year, to the extent that I didn't manage to solve a single problem during the four years of attending this math and physics class. At the same time, however, this situation of a humanist in a math and physics class was good, because I was forgiven a lot in exchange for being able to write nice papers, for always having things to say, and for having more courageous views. Teachers would forgive me

⁵ Though general in educational scope, most Polish high schools are divided into emphases on sciences, humanities or the arts, so students have exposure to more hours of the subjects in which they major.

gaps in other subjects, in math and science. Apart from that, there were a few ladies, whom today I can call sadists with no hesitation, who never forgave anybody for anything, with the strongest lack of forgiveness reserved for their own existence, of course. So, of course, I don't remember these women with warmth, but I'm not demonizing it all either. I'm trying to keep some balance when it comes to memories of that time, because it was also the case that life was actually happening outside of school. These were... it was the end of the 80's, so because of that we'd talk more about what was going on outside of school, in politics, in the world. We were quickly getting mature enough to start thinking about the world and to get some definite worldview... which actually varied, since some of my friends became religious then, others worked in some youth underground movements, and others, and this is where I belonged, were discussing issues endlessly while drinking cherry vodka. So actually, what I remember most about school is that math tests were terrible experiences, that I still disliked school, and that I thought it was hurting me. There was a group of friends, however, that I had in this school, and with whom, sadly enough, I've parted ways dramatically since then, so we're not close friends today, but then they were very important to me, and with these friends, I would spend time quite happily discussing the world.

BK: Did feminism, would you be able to say, appear in some way in high school?

II: It all depends on what we'll assume to be the moment of feminism appearing in somebody's life. Is it about reading the first feminist book, or is it about writing the first feminist piece, or about thinking of oneself as a female subject, or is it, perhaps, about some kinds of activity that doesn't accept limitations. If the last definition were to be binding, it'd be possible to say that I was a feminist since preschool, because I was independent and didn't like institutions I encountered. And these were invariably patriarchal institutions. It should be remembered that 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 70's and the 80's 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. On the other hand, when I look at it now, I think that a feeling of not fitting in, disagreement and rebellion, and a need to look for my own place started somewhere at this preschool, when I didn't want to eat milk soup, and later on in school, when I saw various things, and I saw them, perhaps, more acutely than others, than my peers. Was it more acute in many cases... since, on the one hand, there were political issues, very important at that time, but on the other hand, there was some aura of subordination for me, as a girl, so it did start there, somewhere, of course, but it also belongs, of course, to the myth of origin, which has other moments, too. In my personal CV, there is such a moment of crystallization, much later. In spite of everything, my school biography is also the time of courtship with my husband, and therefore, it's a quest for identity through a typical romance plot, and it was a rebellious romance. My husband was older than I, and what's more, he was my teacher in elementary school, where I met him. Because of this, dating him was then, I believe, an expression of rebellion and independence. So I wasn't thinking about escaping from my femininity, or about escaping this thing one could call a typical scenario for a girl, or for a young woman. Just the opposite, I was carrying out this scenario, but always in the name of independence, always in the name of doing what I believed to be appropriate, so that I couldn't be stopped by the school principal, or by my

mom and dad, or by a neighbor, or by nasty peers, either. I got married after graduation, so one could say that I was following the patriarchy formula, and at that point, for sure, the word “feminism” didn’t appear yet, and, by the way, it didn’t generally appear all that often at all. It wasn’t the time when girls at school could talk about feminism; it wasn’t the time of feminist publications, either. If you lived in Szczecin, went to school at Piast Avenue, and then to another one and then again, married a man you met in this school, got a standard apartment from the employees’ co-op, you were actually outside the kind of language, which could become the language of openness. You would be outside feminism as a movement, as publications, and as a way of thinking. But I was in with this kind of a gesture of independence and separateness then. The real formation, however, of something that was already a definitely feminist attitude happened a bit later. First of all, it was college, when I already felt clearly that I chose what to study, so that I didn’t have problems with math tests any more. I was definitely a very good student, and I was really doing great in theory of literature, in particular. At the same time, I began to notice that I was a discussion partner, who was treated somehow by different rules. Assistant professors believed that discussions with a young novice in the field were interesting, but that a truly interesting discussion could happen only at the same level, with a male colleague. As for intellectual plans that came up then, during my junior year, I began writing, I was doing literary criticism, and I belonged to the Association of Critics at the University of Szczecin. But the case also was that serious conversations, serious things were actually happening among boys. Whether it was an assistant professor, an associate professor or just a male student from my cohort, you could feel that it was this kind of community of boys, and I was there somewhere but I had to speak up to make them hear me, and I had to push through with my presence. Even though people were saying that I was a better writer and maybe I was even smarter than my male peers, somehow the thing was that I felt secondary in this set-up. This, of course, didn’t quite determine anything, because in this... I carried out my secondary protagonist position, so to speak, quite well. I mean I became an assistant professor and started doing research without actually taking to heart all these limitations, which nobody talked about out loud anyway. But when I already started working, things began to happen that were particularly irritating, like, for example, when I was required to treat some professor, who was supposed to be my dissertation mentor, exceptionally well. He was a person from outside Szczecin, and I didn’t respect him. I didn’t consider him a research authority at all. But then some emblematic guy showed up, a professor in a shabby suit, who was supposed to be a role model for me, and, of course, he was no model, and what’s more, he wasn’t even an institutional authority. But I could already feel that everything would actually depend on this person. Finally, I ended up not having him as a mentor. Actually, it needs to be said that nobody was really my mentor. I mean I have some formal mentor written in, but he was only a formal mentor. And it was... it was one such moment. The other was... the whole system in the Institute was like a burden to me. It was the system dominated by a well-known professor, a frivolous joker of sorts, as I’d say today, rather elderly, who undoubtedly was and still is today an eminent intellectual of an incredibly sexist worldview, as well as behavior it needs to be said. I mean this convention, which was at work, of some kind of levity, some Freudian hints in every conversation, and some kind of flirtation of everybody with everybody. This was an atmosphere that was supposed to ensure this professor felt good, so that he felt good. But again, women were never treated seriously, and they weren’t partners in all of this. One or two women would show up somewhere on the horizon, but the real intellectual constellation was created by the Theory of Literature Program, in which... to which women were almost never admitted. And here, of course, was when the feelings of rebellion,

resentment, and need for change were arising in me. This was the second, or maybe already a third, element of my growth toward the word “feminism.” The third was the sexual harassment scandal at the University of Szczecin, probably the first such notorious scandal in Poland, and I became its heroine. The point, in short, was that a certain professor indulged in this harassment trade practically forever. He had come to Szczecin already with this kind of reputation, after being fired elsewhere, from another university, and he had been doing it ever since I could remember, which is probably since my sophomore year, when I had a class with him. Of course, when I was still a student, it made me laugh rather than inspire to any other kind of action, but after I graduated, the issue became more notorious. And actually, some female students came to me, personally, and asked for help in dealing with the issue. Apparently, his actions escalated, and it was actually impossible to pass an exam without letting him touch you. And I participated in the disciplinary commission’s work, I was a witness in the course of the disciplinary trial, and it also opened my eyes to a lot of things. There was one moment, in particular, when I felt that during this whole trial, or pseudo-trial, I was actually the one being on trial, and not this professor. That’s how I felt. I was being questioned in the way... the questions were asked in the way that clearly implied I was in the position of the accused. And what’s best, I was being referred to with the word “feminist,” even though I had not yet written a single feminist text. But actually, I’m gradually moving toward the most important moment, since this most important moment is, of course, related somehow to my social well-being then, to my way of functioning in the patriarchal environment, to my growth and observations, and to a certain system, in which I first happened to study and then to work. And yet my real meeting with feminism was through texts, and I don’t mean feminist texts, but through reading of literature and through searching for myself as a female reader, which seems to me a logical gesture, a logical gesture I haven’t been able to understand till today. And this is also an area of theory I’ll probably be trying to approach for the next ten years. But that’s how it is with the classical education in the humanities: we are taught that the most important point of reference is the personal subject, which has a tendency toward metaphysical concepts and transcendental quests. In other words, in language studies and other areas of the humanities, we are actually taught in a way that makes us sensitive to ourselves in relation to important aspects of the world, God, literature, and people. On the other hand, this continuum gets broken somewhere, because when we seriously start asking ourselves about our own relationship to the text, about seriousness of this text, and about what it’s saying deep down, it turns out that, if we’re women, we suddenly, at some point, have to put a cover on our very subjective thinking, on our subjectivity, because at some point it has to turn out we’re really not there in all of this. That we’re really not these subjects we’ve been trained to become. In short, we’re supposed to be a subjective... to be this central subject, but not when it’s female, God forbid! I had to notice it, of course, as an intelligent student of the Polish studies, and even more so when I started working on literature. And... I’m just approaching the dramatic turning point in my biography. It happened that I first started writing about Odojewski’s⁶ work, and then, later, I realized that the anthropological path I was trying to follow in my writing had a name. And that name was feminism. So, actually, I reached feminism, the theoretical kind, from literary theory, and the one that became the most important, by accident. It is actually possible to say that it’s enough to be a reader of literature, open, well-trained, or open to your own subjective persona, to

⁶ **Odojewski, Włodzimierz:** writer, radio script-writer, journalist, and recipient of many literary awards. He was dismissed for political reasons from his post as Director of the Contemporary Theatre Studio of Polish Radio and left Poland to take up scholarship at the Berlin Academy of Literature in 1971.

yourself as a subjective persona, or in other words, it's enough to be the top student in the literature theory class in order to end up with feminism. In a way, there is no other way.

BK: What was your first contact with the women's movement?

II: Let's remember we're talking about a provincial⁷ feminist. In the 80's I wasn't traveling much, and had no such contacts. Therefore, my contact was, in a way, through books first. I can't reconstruct it exactly, and I wouldn't like to lie about it, but the name of Sławka Walczewska⁸ was involved for sure. But which book it was, and whether it was already after publishing the anthology *Głos mądra kobiety (Women's Turn)*, or at some point between... at the beginning of the 90's... I certainly wrote to Sławka with a request, or rather a question if she wouldn't like to participate in the conference I was planning to organize, the conference about persuasion in the contemporary culture. Sławka responded rather reluctantly, because she was probably thinking that the way I wanted to treat feminism wasn't the way feminism wanted to go. Till today, by the way, I insist on this option of treating feminism as one of discourse languages, which also adheres to some laws of rhetoric, and I don't see anything inappropriate in this. But, of course, at that point, this introductory... this kind of looking from afar at what it might have been about, or even some kind of initial distrust, didn't matter to me. I cared about the contact, that it got initiated. Because of that, Sławka didn't quite pick up on the invitation to my conference, but instead, she invited me to the Kraków feminist conference, organized by the Kraków foundation eFKa. I don't remember what year it was, even though these aren't really distant times, but most likely I don't remember because so much happened in my life during the last several years. And this was, in fact, the first institutional contact, if we can call it that. I basically don't know if I should call it that, because its result was not that I joined some organization or started my own organization, but only that I gained personal contacts with people, with girls, who work on these issues. And, of course, again what happened was like a chain of reading, initiatives, and thinking that was very important to me. And I actually don't know which moment is more of a turning point, the one at my own desk, or the one when I was meeting other women. Here is where my two parallel lines of thinking about feminism were being created. And I don't exactly remember, either... because later on, these conferences... everything gets to be more accelerated. I get confused about specific conferences and various incidents while facts, some funny and others very important, tend to overlap. And I don't remember whether it was the first conference, when I went through this illumination of amazement, or one of the later ones. At any rate, it was the conference, where the idea came up of excluding lesbians from the discourse, or maybe not just from the discourse as much as from the conference hall. The point was that, in an incredibly impulsive way, one of the participants spoke against the need to talk about sexual preferences that didn't involve all of us, that we didn't need it, because it was giving us a lot of bad rap, and, yet, we weren't... and here she most likely used... I don't want to put words into her mouth, but there were some words, which aren't generally considered offensive, but really are, perhaps. I remember my very childish, spontaneous amazement then, because I actually knew nothing about these discussions in the feminist movement. This was the beginning of my feminist

⁷ Iwaszow uses the term since she was educated and works in Szczecin which is located away from intellectual and academic centers like Warszawa or Kraków.

⁸ **Walczewska, Sławka:** Director of the Women's Foundation eFKa in Cracow, Poland and Global Feminisms Poland Site Coordinator. Co-founder of the Green Party 2004 and author of *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists: Women's Discourse in Poland* (1999).

reading, so I wasn't burdened, overburdened, with any special knowledge about this. It seemed to me totally amazing that that in a group that I understood to be... that I saw as a group of people, among whom there was liberation, honesty, freedom, sisterly feelings, you know, the only place of truth, that in this group, such definite, sharp, and clear-cut exclusions could even occur. I couldn't get it. I was terribly naïve. It's strange I was so naïve while simultaneously I was a rather smart person, with some experience in life, and writing pieces that were already quite decent, so that I'm not ashamed of them today and don't consider them a juvenile form in my research career, as I'm thinking about it now. And at the same time, I was so completely naïve when it came to this issue, to the issue of what the feminist movement was like, what sisterhood was, which topics were desirable and which were the ones people were silent about. And this is actually also a very important moment and worth remembering.

BK: You've mentioned these several years since your participation in that conference. What feminist events have happened during this time?

II: Actually, almost everything that has happened is feminist, and this is some phenomenon I should be thankful for. I mean since the very beginning, since writing the dissertation, later published with the subtitle: "Feminist Interpretation," I have never really had to pretend I'm not working on feminism. Most of my research appears in pieces about feminist criticism, feminist theory, feminist interpretation, and the broader discourse theory, or this wretched persuasion, which once disheartened Sławka Walczewska, but it's all within this area. Sometimes, it's with a broader theoretical background, and sometimes it's very narrow, and particularly when I'm focusing on myself as a feminist reader. And all... actually all stages of my career have been illuminated with feminist books. That's what my habilitation⁹ was like, about Leopold Tyrmand's¹⁰ work, but with questions about relations among categories of exclusion, nationality and minority, and also with questions that have been most important to me for all these years and that started it all: Who am I when facing a male text? Who am I when facing the male culture? Where is my sensitivity, the one trained in Polish studies, which is, simultaneously, the sensitivity of an aware and conscious feminist? So it's habilitation but also actually all the more important pieces that came out in the meantime, and also a series *Rozbiory (Partitions)*, which is about interpretations done with various methodologies, and where I represent the feminist methodology, and also tens of articles, conferences, meetings, and initiatives typical of the mainstream research activity. For example, there are literary theory conferences, organized every year by IBL (The Institute of Literary Research),¹¹ which are actually the most important theory of literature conferences in Poland, and I've been going there for years, and I always present a feminist paper. In short, I have never had to hide my feminism, and neither have I had to do any dancing around being a feminist. I have integrated it all; being a feminist and being a literary scholar is the same thing. Also being a critic. I've mentioned that I started working on literary criticism in my junior year in college, and I've been doing it ever since. It's one of my most

⁹ **Habilitation (Habilitation):** is a term used within the university systems in Poland, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and other European countries. It describes the process of qualifying for admission as a university professor.

¹⁰ **Tyrmand, Leopold** (Jan Andrzej Stanisław Kowalski 1920-1985): writer and publicist who was one of the main promoters of jazz in Poland. In 1966, he moved to the United States where he wrote for *The New Yorker* and lectured at the State University of New York and Columbia University.

¹¹ **The Institute of Literary Studies (Instytut Badań Literackich):** founded in 1948. Research conducted at the Institute comprises primarily Polish literary history, literary theory, cultural history, literary documentation and lexicography. It is affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (Polska Akademia Nauk).

favorite things to do. Also as a critic, I try to read things as a feminist, and there is a collection *Rewindykacje (Demands)*, related to these issues, which I published in the publishing house Universitas. So it'd be hard to say it's somewhere in the underground, or within a smaller, peripheral trend, or in a smaller publishing house. It'd even be hard to talk about functioning solely within a feminist circuit, organizational or any other. It seems to me that it is, indeed, very important to enter into the mainstream culture, into the mainstream scholarship, and, what's even more important, to work on making my feminist language become a part of the general language. So now at the place I am now... and now I am a contract professor at the University of Szczecin, but I'm working on getting the full professor title very soon. Also, my basis of applying for this title will be two books, which are feminist in character. One of them, *Gender dla średnio zaawansowanych (Gender for the Intermediate)*, is a kind of a handbook, which discusses the main concepts of feminist criticism. And the second book, which... which is to be published by the university press of the University of Szczecin, is handling the same issues... with... more in-depth. It's not a good word, perhaps. It's a bit... how shall I say it...

BK: Do you mean that it's more scholarly or specialized?

II: Yes, yes, yes, this second book, which uses a slightly more scholarly language, is a book about the theory of interpretation for a rather experienced reader when it comes to this kind of reading. This book, which will be published by the university press of the University of Szczecin, and which seems very important to me now, is probably the best thing I've written in my life. A bit of a paradox is that the book, which will appear in this big-edition publishing house, to me barely a background for it, will be published in just 200 copies.

BK: You are also an editor-in-chief of the cultural bi-monthly *Pogranicza (Borderlands)*, published in Szczecin.

II: Yes, next year it'll be ten years since we created this publication. There were actually the three of us, including the late Mirek Lalak, who was the editor-in-chief and an important person in my life, since he was the assistant professor who taught the theory of literature class, the professor who was letting me speak a lot but didn't treat me very seriously. It was a little like this in *Borderlands* as well. I mean, as long as this constellation was like that, that is with the two guys and later the third, who did the setting but was also very close to us, so that he also had an impact on content, and I was fourth, it was always a little bit... like always, like everywhere... that these guys were actually more important, in spite of the fact that I had never... and definitely for the last several years, I certainly had not allowed them to dominate me. Mirek died tragically, in an accident. Of course, it's always the case that deaths of people that we're close to are important experiences, this way or another, but here it also coincided with the fact that he actually, in some symbolic way, passed managing of the publication on to me at his deathbed. So again, it's like a literary plot I haven't used anywhere yet, but I'm constantly thinking about it. And I have to say that, in fact... I'm saying this more to show how it often works than to speak about myself at this point, but it so happened that since I took over *Borderlands*, a lot of things have been straightened out, from finances to its publication regularity. Somehow, I have happened to be more successful at convincing the City Council and sponsors to give us a regular donation than it was the case in those earlier years. I have an impression that some order has been brought into the magazine, because, first of all, I have been more convincing than my

colleagues, and second of all, a childhood friend of mine showed up, who... whom I have actually met by coincidence now, and who was also at a turning point in her life, looking for a job, and she became an executive secretary of the publication, and I mean the male not female connotation of the term secretary. So she becomes the executive secretary and begins to keep some order in the magazine. So this is a story of a past friendship gained back and at the same time a story of great collaboration on the publication of the magazine. And I have an irresistible impression, confirmed by many people, that she is the one who has become the central point of the publication and that we're doing it together, in a way, even if it'd be a bit immodest to attribute so much merit to myself. But somehow it happens that *Borderlands*, actually even when Mirek was still the editor-in-chief, have taken up women's issues, feminist issues but... and these were ones of more interesting publications, we need to say. That's a common opinion. It's probably because when you invite selected people and when you come up with ideas for monographic issues, it by itself guarantees at least some success. Moreover, somehow it's the case that women can write in an interesting way, in a way that still opens things up, but without circling around the same topic endlessly, like it happens in some other publications. What is particularly important to me is that in *Borderlands*, there is always room for women. Sometimes I have to pretend... I have to play dumb in front of colleagues... I have to pretend a bit that it's just coincidental, that it's not intentional. It makes me sad to talk about it, but it is a bit like this... that in this role I have to pretend the most, make a bit of a circus around the publication's profile. While I don't have to do anything like this in my scholarly work, I have to pretend in front of colleagues from the magazine. For example, if we have ten reviews of books written by women, it's like OK, women happened to write them, and they write well. On the other hand, if I tried to force the argument that women were the most interesting critics these days and that the way women go about literary criticism was now the most interesting, then most likely a discussion in the magazine would go on for a long time, and it's hard to know where it would lead.

BK: You write not only critical and theoretical works but you're also a writer and a poet.

II: It's probably that smart children, who write good papers, later become literary critics and theorists, and they miss these childhood papers, so that they'd like to become somebody else as well. Actually, before I turned thirty, I didn't pay much attention to my literary work and to myself as a person creating literature. I just happened to write some small pieces. However, the paradox is that I actually wrote my first poem... probably still as a child, but I mean the first serious poem I wrote was written as a joke, when I was preparing one of the feminist issues of *Borderlands*, and it turned out that the hardest thing to find is good feminist poetry.¹² While I could get best writing in all the other genres, poetry still, in spite of everything, could inspire some doubt if you were to use literary criteria. Then, I wrote a poem, more as a joke than seriously, but I published it myself. That was the story of my awakening to writing poetry. But, in reality, it's perhaps a different story, because the problem isn't funny at all, but it's deep and important to me, because I have an impression that, paradoxically, only now have I become mature enough to write literature, and it's much easier for me to write theory books than to write a novel, which I think I have in me. I hope that time will come when I'll be able to do it, that, among all these different tasks in life, among many professions I pursue, and inside this whole chase I'm trapped in, I will find the time, because you can't write a novel, of course, between

¹² Iwasiów writes and publishes feminist and erotic poetry. None of her poems have been translated into English.

3:00 and 3:15 p.m., during a short coffee break. By the way, I really envy these girls, my colleagues, who can devote themselves to writing, because they turned it into the way of life. At the same time, of course, I'm a post-structuralist, so I believe that all the genres are equal, and I don't see any particularly big difference between my pieces interpreting *The Doll* by Prus and my short stories about Szczecin. The thing is that I, actually, have one language for both of these forms, for both genres, and I'm very happy that this language of mine was accepted in scholarship, so that I didn't have to get rid of my literary aspirations when I was writing about the so-called serious issues. Perhaps I happened to make a lucky hit when post-structuralist writing has come into fashion. On the other hand, the thing also is that writing in serious genres, you also begin thinking about the limits of language, you also begin pondering what poetry is, what metaphor is, how to express the inexpressible, and then some inner temptation shows up to try this, to play with this and to see who you are in a poem, who you are as a subject of a poem, and who you are in the course of this operation of expressing the inexpressible. In a sense, then, writing poetry by a literary scholar is again something natural. It is an extension of breathing from literary theory. It is self-introspection in the act of using language. And this is part of the truth. The other part of the truth is perhaps that, in spite of everything, it is also an intimate act you're longing for, because even when you're writing about texts by others, or about theories of texts, in the most open and honest way, you're somehow stuck with the rhetorical structures you have to use to speak. So if you want to cross this border, if you want to touch this something... even if you are a constructivist and you don't believe this something exists, you still have a need and a temptation, and you keep looking for... looking for these various feelings and impressions you remember or simply have inside you. And that's probably how it was with me. My pieces are actually documents of some processes occurring within me, very intense ones, I feel. And I hope that I will participate in these processes many times, and that I will find myself in this something I will call inspiration, as a good Polish studies student and against post-structuralist ideas. What I mean is that now I will not write another scholarly book, but this time it'll be another literary book.

BK: As a college teacher, do you believe feminism is something that can be taught?

II: Feminism, feminist criticism, is certainly something that may belong to the academic curriculum of a modern university. And I've been co-creating this curriculum and trying to introduce this perspective for many years, since the time I taught literary history of the 19th century. Currently, I'm teaching these seminars and monographic lectures. And this is a part of knowledge students could be taught. Of course, it's possible to do something more, and I'm trying to do also this something more. And that is evoking some atmosphere conducive to feminism. You can teach by example; you can encourage students to some actions, meetings and discussions. And I'm trying to do all this. That's a part of it. It may end with success or not, because you can't force students, of course, to accept feminist ideas and to reconstruct their consciousness. You can only show some path. So I would make a distinction between teaching about feminism as providing some knowledge, and creating a certain communication community, within which it would be possible to carry out feminist principles. Both of these... there is a place for both of these at a university. In my case, it's also that my persistent action on behalf of feminist courses, conducted for many years, has resulted in a curriculum change in Szczecin, by introducing new courses related to feminism, as a broader course offering in the future, and, most likely, it will be carried out. There are also discussions that happen in the

broader context. Next year, there will be a Polish Studies Congress, in September 2004. I'm going to participate in the Congress, and I will speak about the gender subject construction. So, the issue has, actually, entered into the salons, or rather offices, where discussions are carried out about what a modern university should be and what curriculum it should have, particularly in the area of Polish studies, or, more broadly, in the area of the humanities. This is what I consider my success.

Inga Iwasiów

06.06. 1963	Born in Szczecin, Northwestern Poland
1983 and 1984	Gave birth to two sons
1987	Graduated from the Polish Studies Department at the University of Szczecin
1993	Ph.D. in feminist theory and literary criticism
2000	Received Habilitacja, ¹³ a post-graduate degree

Works at the University of Szczecin, where she actively promotes gender studies. She is also an editor-in-chief of the literary criticism journal Pogranicza (Borderlands)

¹³ **Habilitation (Habilitacja):** is a term used within the university systems in Poland, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary and other European countries. It describes the process of qualifying for admission as a university professor..

Publications

Borderlands in Włodzimierz Odojewski's Literature: A Feminist Intervention

Story and Silence: Leopold Tyrmand's Prose

Revindication: Today's Woman Reader

Borderlands (journal volumes)

City-my-City

Love