

Beyond Agon: The Decolonization of the Feminist Tradition in Arleta Galant's and Agnieszka Gajewska's Literary Criticism Projects

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Polish feminist literary criticism – as part of the debate over women's writing after 1989 – built its identity both on the rejection of canonical models of reading and on the search for different, alternative reading communities. Recognizing fundamental tensions between the open (the rebellious) and the closed (the normative) potential of tradition, in my opinion, defines most Polish feminist literary criticism projects of the 1990s.¹ They are also defined by the fact that they try to transcend antagonisms that such binary tensions generate. Cultivating (rather than erasing) ambivalence about the past (defined as pre-existing models of reading literature and generating knowledge about it) determines the dynamics of perceiving and analyzing tradition. It is more often than not a feminist “dance through the minefield”² rather than an agon,³ as evidenced by

¹ Monika Świerkosz, *W przestrzeniach tradycji. Proza Izabeli Filipiak i Olgi Tokarczuk w sporach o literaturę, kanon i feminizm* [Within the realms of tradition: Izabela Filipiak's and Olga Tokarczuk's prose in disputes about literature, canon and feminism] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2015). Katarzyna Majbroda wrote about the many different strategies of Polish feminist literary critics and their approaches to the feminist canon and theory in: *Feministyczna krytyka literacka w Polsce po 1989 roku. Tekst, dyskurs, poznanie z odmiennej perspektywy* [Feminist literary criticism in Poland after 1989. Text, discourse, and understanding from a different perspective] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2012).

² Anette Kolodny, “Dancing through the minefield: Some observations on the theory, practice, and politics of a feminist literary criticism”, *Feminist Studies* 1 (1980): 1–25.

³ Although the very concept of “agon” may also be defined in a constructive way – as exemplified by Chantal Mouffe and her radical left-wing approach – in this essay I follow feminist revisions of Harold Bloom's model of entering the literary agon, due to its influence on literary criticism. For Bloom, agon – linked to the psychoanalytic mechanism of parricide – involves the need to triumph over a strong opponent, whose defeat (symbolic murder and absorption) paves the way to recognition and greatness. The agonistic relation in the literary field is thus governed by the principle of “either me or you;” difference requires one to locate oneself in the dualistic structure of conflict, the resolution of which gives rise to a community of “strong” writers. See: Harold Bloom, *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

the critical essays of Arleta Galant and Agnieszka Gajewska. I find them interesting also because of their auto-meta-critical nature, insofar as they dare to ask questions about the role and significance of identity politics for the community of women readers and writers (although not only them).

In this essay, I examine how Polish feminist literary critics coped with and responded to a crisis, methodological exhaustion, and boredom that dominated in the discussion about literature and gender in the 2000s. I also examine how they creatively used the tensions between the “old” and the “new” (also in feminist literary criticism) to transform their reading tools.

Let me begin by discussing the foundations for this discussion, as laid in the 1990s, which I believe allows us to identify specific and recurring tensions.

Towards tradition – against and according to expectations

Western women’s studies scholars, who have been developing the concept of women’s literary tradition since the 1970s, often talked more about heteroglossia and a “double-voiced discourse” in women’s writing, about its borderline, palimpsest-like, and complex nature, rather than called for a radical break with men’s literary tradition.⁴ Given the relatively small number of revisionist and confrontational andro-critical projects (feminist (re)reading of men’s texts) in Poland, it is the different forms of reclaiming and paraphrasing – which, to repeat after Inga Iwasiów, I define as an affectively ambiguous reclaiming of the literary past for the purposes of a feminist reading – that, I believe, dominate in Polish feminist literary criticism.⁵ Back in 1996, when asked about the significance of tradition as part of a literary questionnaire in *Teksty Drugie*, Izabela Morska (*née* Filipiak) distanced herself from both the rebel writers associated with *bruLion* and the conservative classicists.⁶ She said:

I wear both my grandmother’s ridiculously delicate blouses and her fitted jackets and my grandfather’s baggy sweaters, collared shirts, I dye my mother’s antique aprons in uneven, galactic streaks, and I worry about what will happen when all these clothes eventually wear out...

⁴ Świerkosz, 19–63. The theory of the borderland nature of women’s literature and its “double-voiced discourse” were developed by Elaine Showalter. The ideas of the “affiliation complex” as well as the palimpsest construction of women’s texts were crucial, in turn, to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s revision of Bloom’s agonistic “anxiety of influence.” Nancy K. Miller wrote interestingly about mimicry, following in the footsteps of Luce Irigaray. Moreover, in French feminist thought (Hélène Cixous) emphasis is also placed on the subversive acts of “stealing” and intercepting male language, which is the point of departure for a woman writer – her flight to the margins

⁵ It is affectively ambiguous because it takes place between love for the text and conflict and hurt caused by it. See Inga Iwasiów, *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj* [Revindications. The women-reader today] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Universitas, 2002) and Inga Iwasiów, *Parafrazy i reinterpretacje. Wykłady z teorii i praktyki czytania* [Paraphrases and reinterpretations. Lectures on the theory and practice of reading] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2004). Ewa Kraskowska also emphasizes that critical tools (both feminist and non-feminist) should be eclectic and in that sense complementary, see Ewa Kraskowska, *Czytelnik jako kobieta. Wokół literatury i teorii* [The reader as a woman. Around literature and theory] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2007).

⁶ Andrzej Stasiuk wrote at the time, among other things, that “no tradition may be found standing outside the window. / Yes, there is no fucking tradition outside the window” – citing the famous poem “Wiersz wspólny półfinałowy” [Semi-final joint poem] by Marcin Baran, Marcin Świetlicki, and Marcin Sendek, all of whom were affiliated with *bruLion*; Andrzej Stasiuk, “Ankieta «Tekstów Drugich»” [The questionnaire of *Teksty Drugie*], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (1996): 119. In turn, Krzysztof Koehler (who still wrote for *bruLion* at the time) said: “Tradition, to paraphrase Norwid, is Obligation. Norwid was talking about the Homeland, but what else can Homeland be for a poet. In principle, I would also talk about the Homeland, Memory, Standing in the Shadow, and Following in somebody’s Footsteps, which lie at the heart of national belonging,” Krzysztof Koehler, “Ankieta «Tekstów Drugich»,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (1996): 117.

Unfortunately, I have the impression that they already have. A dispute is good for a moment, but when we engage in it for a longer period of time, we forget where we really want to be. On the other hand, I also feel a certain reluctance towards using tradition — tradition as a set of topics to which one uncritically refers, thus assuring oneself and others that one writes “great” literature. But also turning at all costs towards modernity, distilled from history, would mean that one is forever trapped in a vicious circle of antitheses. [...] I do not like the word “tradition” and would prefer to replace it with the word “inspiration.” Inspiration is a feeling of delight caused by recognizing a shared tone, discovering a motif that speaks to me. It is a beautiful word that suggests beginning, completion, and its extraordinary lightness.⁷

Morska clearly advocates for compromise, exploration, and at the same time contestation. She is critical of what is normative in tradition but does not negate it entirely. She emphasizes the importance of both roots and growth, wishing to creatively use all that she finds inspirational in the past.⁸

However, and I cannot stress this enough, this nomadic way of thinking about tradition was nevertheless defined by what characterizes most gynocritical herstories of literature, which were written with, as Inga Iwasiów aptly put it, the “optimism of liberal female colonizers.”⁹ Expeditions to unknown lands (lost continents of the female tradition, virgin no man’s land, feminist hinterlands, and rooms of one’s own) were of course meant to discover the female self, which in these spatial metaphors functioned as the “promised land.” The female self was meant to be discovered with the approval of the previously forgotten and lonely but now reclaimed (literary) mothers, grandmothers, and sisters. As Iwasiów reminds us, the goal was to gain a “useful tradition.” However, she adds, unlike in the West, where the reclaiming/colonization of the past by feminism resulted in the now classic literary criticism projects, in Poland such endeavors more often than not ended in disappointment – with scholars discovering that Shakespeare had no “brilliant sisters” or that women’s texts stored in the archives were often conservative and unoriginal.¹⁰ Their works (apart from relatively few exceptions) could hardly be read using the tools of feminist literary criticism, with its dominant categories of subversion, anti-phallogocentrism, one’s original voice, female (sub)culture, and female language.

Moreover, the herstorical turn towards the literary past of women writers – with critics either completely ignoring or uniquely reclaiming the times of the Polish People’s Republic – as well as the parallel trend of feminist phantasmatic criticism, which deconstructs the national myth through the analysis of female stories, figures, and symbols (Maria Janion’s legacy), is

⁷ Izabela Filipiak, “Ankieta «Tekstów Drugich»”, *Teksty Drugie* 5 (1996): 113–115.

⁸ A different more negative or predatory form of this “exploitation” is discussed by Filipiak in her essay “Literatura monstrualna” [Monstrous literature.] It takes the form of a metaphorized image of canonical parasitism: the writer, like mistletoe, feeds on the juices of the canon, poisoning it with her monstrous “works.” Izabela Filipiak, “Literatura monstrualna” [Monstrous literature], *OŚKA* 1 (1999): 1–9.

⁹ Inga Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych. Wykłady szczecińskie* [Gender for intermediate level students. The Szczecin lectures] (Warsaw: WAB, 2004): 32.

¹⁰ Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych*, 34. Arleta Galant also discusses the feeling of disappointment of (Polish) women’s studies scholars, who most often unsuccessfully search for the “essence” of women’s writing and personal revolt in autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries, in her book *Prywatne, publiczne, autobiograficzne. O dziennikach i esejach Jana Lechońa, Zofii Nałkowskiej i Jerzego Stempowskiego* [The Private, the public, the autobiographical: The diaries and essays of Jan Lechoń, Zofia Nałkowska, and Jerzy Stempowski] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2010), 56.

both methodologically traditional and anti-traditional in the realities of the Polish academia. Dorota Kozicka explains that:

Shortly before Maliszewski began to seek an answer to the question of how to be a Polish writer, Grażyna Borkowska, in her text entitled *Feministyczna utopia* [Feminist utopia], wrote about the “marginal and niche nature of feminist practices in Poland” and suggested that feminism could be tamed by writing about forgotten women – women writers, activists, thinkers.¹¹

Therefore, when a discussion on politics and engagement – a discussion all the more important because it continued into the 2000s¹² – first began in Polish literary studies in 1989, one of the pioneers of Polish feminist criticism, Grażyna Borkowska, had already managed to, in a sense, announce its end, suggesting that we should return to the study of tradition, herstory, and searching for women’s literary and cultural heritage.¹³ It and of itself this trend in feminist literary criticism was (and in my opinion still is) endowed with a great subversive potential. More importantly, it also proved effective, giving rise to many excellent works which challenged the Polish canon. This notwithstanding, it seems that the focus on feminist tradition emphasized by Borkowska could have been, in a sense, a conservative reaction to the conservative Polish academia, which had to “assimilate” feminism before it could embrace it. So Polish feminist critics focused on the past and thus helped “tame” feminism...

What do I think the first feminist literary critics leave behind for their slightly younger sisters? A realization that many blank spots still exist in women’s literary history and an understanding that talking about them either with the help of grand or small colonizing/identity narratives is not possible. Younger feminist literary critics are encouraged to reclaim those histories but without a sense of separatist pride in their heritage, without a desire for a clearly defined identity. They often need to come to terms with the fact that women’s texts are often minor, secondary literature and that they generate both curiosity and disappointment. Younger feminist literary critics must also be prepared to feel interpretive fatigue as a result of the inadequacy or repetitiveness of their reading modes. They should recognize that the concept of “femininity” may become a poetological and identity norm, and that the concept of “sisterhood” may be used to exclude women writers who turned out to be troublesome, unwanted, or even “other” in the female continuum from the point of view of politics/identity/class/ethnicity/aesthetics.¹⁴

In the late 2000s, there was an impression that feminist literary criticism in Poland – also in the opinion of those scholars who had been laying its methodological foundations since the

¹¹Dorota Kozicka, “Od Kopciuszka do... Feministyczne potyczki z krytyką literacką” [From Cinderella to... Feminist struggles with literary criticism], *Women Online Writing* 3 (2014): 48.

¹²Igor Stokfiszewski, “Co to znaczy dzisiaj być polską pisarką?” [What does it mean to be a Polish woman writer today?], *Litera* 1 (2008), reprinted in: Igor Stokfiszewski, *Zwrot polityczny* [The political turn] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009), 169–177.

¹³Grażyna Borkowska, “Feministyczna utopia” [Feminist utopia], *Ex Libris* 21 (1992).

¹⁴Sporne postaci polskiej krytyki feministycznej po 1989 roku [Disputed figures in Polish feminist criticism after 1989] identifies a number of blank spots. In the Polish context (in 2015, when a seminar under the same title was held), these turned out to be, among others, communist, working class, and Jewish women, provincial and regional women writers, as well as male authors who contested hegemonic masculinity and women authors who wrote “in a masculine” manner. See: *Sporne postaci polskiej krytyki feministycznej po 1989 roku* [Disputed figures in Polish feminist criticism after 1989], ed. Monika Świerkosz (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2016).

1990s – reached saturation, or perhaps even satiety.¹⁵ In my opinion, this, at least partially, gave rise to interesting interdisciplinary shifts. Some scholars took (but did not abandon) their feminist “toolbox” to explore other areas in order to deepen or broaden perspectives.¹⁶

In what follows, I will examine two literary criticism projects which, in my opinion, want to decolonize women’s studies from the outside in, so as to transform it into a critique of contemporaneity that is focused on the present.¹⁷ In my view, the focus is still placed on the possibilities of pursuing a politics of identity and productively engaging with the notion of “difference”—and not just gendered difference.

Arleta Galant’s politics of location

The cultural turn in literary women’s studies – which Arleta Galant describes, illuminates, and problematizes in her book¹⁸ – leads towards a strategic defense of the political implications of gender identity and female authorship. This is quite surprising for at least two reasons. First, because it turns out that, despite the fears that the feminist perspective might get lost in an amalgam of class, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., the growing influence of cultural studies on women’s studies is not a threat to female identities but an opportunity to capture their multifaceted materialities. Second, because the political implications of female identity are defended by someone who does not hide her disappointment with the very category of “women’s writing.” Analyzing the writings of young women writers and critics (after 2005), Galant notices that “the term that defined and emancipated the literary achievements of women writers in the 1990s is of little use today; it turns out to be a hollow term with no critical potential.”¹⁹ Gender once again becomes a private issue; it is no longer discussed in literature but in biography.²⁰

¹⁵Such opinions may be found, for example, in a special issue of *Wielogłos*, devoted to summarizing the achievements of Polish feminism in literary studies. Borkowska writes in it about “a darkening of mirrors” (i.e. her abandonment of a narcissistic, autobiographical way of doing literary studies, which focused on the female “I”); Grażyna Borkowska, “Powolne ciemnienie zwierciadeł” [A gradual darkening of mirrors], *Wielogłos* 2 (2011): 40–43. Kraskowska, in turn, writes about “harvesttime,” which is productive and satisfying, but not as creative as “sowing time;” Ewa Kraskowska, “Współczesna krytyka literacka: inny stan skupienia” [Contemporary literary criticism: A different state of matter], *Wielogłos* 2 (2011): 51–59. Kłosińska, respectively, reflects on the limits of feminist hermeneutics; Krystyna Kłosińska, “Poststriptum” [Poststriptum], *Wielogłos* 2 (2011): 37–39. Kłosińska’s monumental *Feministyczna krytyka literacka* [Feminist literary criticism], in my opinion, also ends with a sort of elegy; Krystyna Kłosińska, *Feministyczna krytyka literacka* [Feminist literary criticism] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010).

¹⁶Many literary studies scholars now tend to focus on men’s studies and queer studies, posthuman studies, ecocriticism and animal studies, cultural studies/anthropology, disability studies, and social history. Biography and autobiography studies, as well as broadly understood contemporary philosophy, is still a field that may be actively explored and transformed.

¹⁷Iwasiów, *Gender dla średniozaawansowanych*, 36.

¹⁸Arleta Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne. Studia i szkice nie tylko o literaturze* [Critical turns. Essays not only about literature] (Kraków: Universitas, 2018). Galant spoke about the fact that some aspects of cultural studies might be beneficial for feminist literary criticism during the 2nd Academic Feminist Congress in 2011. First published in: Arleta Galant, “Feministycznie o historii literatury i zwrocie kulturowym. Przypisy do dwóch projektów” [Feminist literary history and the cultural turn: Footnotes to two projects], *Women Online Writing* 3 (2014): 69–79.

¹⁹Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 29.

²⁰Galant interestingly projects these tropes of the exhaustion of the potential of women’s writing in the 21st century onto the broader question of the fading attractiveness of the feminist narrative in literary life and discourse. “...in recent years, when feminism went out of fashion (which it never was) and remained (as usual) a serious ideological work, I came to the conclusion that after 2005, i.e. after the publication of the most important, foundational, books by Polish feminist literary critics, feminist consciousness is more visible in Polish public life than in literature and literary criticism.” Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne* 9.

Moreover, Galant has repeatedly drawn attention to the pitfalls of feminist identity politics, which, in literary women's studies, either make us believe that the experience of gender oppression creates sufficient space for the constitution of an emancipatory community or encourages us to cognitively privilege the victim.

Pointing to the conservative nature of the writings of fellow contemporary women writers and critics, Galant differs significantly in her vision of the 1990s from Przemysław Czapliński, who in "Kobiety i duch tożsamości" [Women and the spirit of identity] famously argued that the revolutionary potential of women's writing at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries was lost. After the initial period of feminist "*Sturm und Drang*," Czapliński writes, women writers gradually retreated to the safe positions of "identity," giving up on their otherness in favor of the gender *status quo*.²¹

Galant, however, argues that neither were the 1990s such a progressive and "feminist" time nor was an "excess of identity (politics)" the main problem in contemporary Polish women's writing. Quite the opposite, Galant claims that the question of identity was not discussed enough. It seems that 21st-century women writers (and what about critics?), Galant writes, fell into an old trap: either gender or humanity, either "identity" or "otherness." They eventually moved beyond gender but in a way that is not reminiscent of Donna Haraway's and Judith Butler's post-gender rebellions. The diluted female "I" emerging from their texts turned out to be not so much a way to overcome gender binarism but rather the effect of relegating this category back into the realm of the private. The complex questions of identity and the links between biography and writing were thus silenced. Galant does not find such an escape into universalism, which may be seen in the works of Małgorzata Rejmer, Marta Syrwid, Janina Bauman, Anda Rottenberg, and Manuela Gretkowska, convincing. And although she understands that gender is not the only "vulnerable component/element of social identity," in her literary criticism project she defends feminism as a framework for critical thinking – a framework that allows one to see gender and describe it in complex entanglements with society, family, economy, class, sex, geopolitics, etc. Feminism defined in this way has never been (and still is not) for her *gender-only feminism* nor a "particular worldview" which stands in opposition to universalism.²²

Indeed, Galant is disappointed by women's writing.²³ And yet she recognizes its feminist potential – how it informs the concept of identity. Still, she reads it through the prism of Adrienne Rich's "politics of location,"²⁴ in which she sees a chance to combine gender and post-dependent (decolonizing) perspectives:

²¹Przemysław Czapliński, "Kobiety i duch tożsamości" [Women and the spirit of identity], in: Przemysław Czapliński, *Efekt bierności. Literatura w czasie normalnym* [The passivity effect: Literature in normal time] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004), 97–130.

²²Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 20. The terms gender-only feminism and multi issue/left feminism were coined and discussed by Ellen C. DuBois in: "Eleanor Flexner and the History of American Feminism", *Gender and History* 1 (1991): 81–90.

²³And not only by women. She argues that attempts to neutralize any traces of "queerness" may be found in the personal writings of many Polish authors (Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Anda Rottenberg, and Ewa Kuryluk). Respectively, she also observes that certain narrative patterns are regularly repeated.

²⁴Galant draws on Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a politics of location," in: Adrienne Rich, *Blood, bread, and poetry: Selected prose 1979-1985* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 210-231. Rich's essay, first published in 1984, heralds the arrival of the feminist Third Wave. Black women lawyers and sociologists (Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins) pointed to the importance of "intersectionality." Rich, as a powerful and radical figure of second-wave feminism, speaks in this essay from within the feminist community and yet she dares to reflect on her own position and question her practices of critical thinking.

Rich combines the “politics of location” with the “politics of identity” – gender, race, sexuality, social status determine different types of exclusions. In her decolonizing approach, Rich talks about how the “I” is created, how it becomes – unjustly so – the subject that drifts towards the center.²⁵

Such a reading of Rich gives rise to an interesting paradox: by looking at what “drifts toward the center” – which in the Polish context usually means the reproduction of the watered-down and supposedly universalized “I” – we are able to map the tensions that ultimately challenge the traditional (and homogeneous) notion of community; such tensions emerge when the private and the public meet. In other words, examining avoidances, defeats, and failures connected with the concept of identity, and there are many in the personal texts by women and other “others,” according to Galant, may reveal when and how “difference” functions. This, in turn, allows us to see more clearly the boundaries (and thus the definitional frameworks and determinants) of the normative center. They usually remain hidden, invisible.

But what can a feminist critic do with her discovery?

The theory of location taught me a lesson: when an intimate text is devoid of excess, any biographical revolts, any subversions, one may – taking into account constructivist theories of the subject and autobiography – call it stereotypical, conventional, anachronistic, conformist, but one may also take a step back and reflect on the public limits of private expression, reflect on culture and identity, reflect on everything that is missing from the list of subversive expectations.²⁶

Interestingly, the critic responds to the post-2005 “retreat from identity” – which gives rise to conservative texts that hide any traces of otherness (including gender otherness) and repeat the clichés of universalizing narratives – by “taking a step back.” I do not read her ingenious strategy as a defense of those subjectivities that turn out to be insufficiently rebellious but above all as a conscious decision to “make room” for questions about intersectionality and relationality. These questions require one to circle around essentialist labels in order to extract the cultural, historical, and social context behind them. Identity politics filtered through the “politics of location” calls for a cultural turn in gender and autobiographical studies which, after all, has already been greatly influenced by cultural studies. This new cultural turn, however, is not constructivist. Its goal is to deterritorialize. Within its dynamic frameworks, identity is not rejected as an essentialist illusion or a patriarchal cliché, nor is it defined as an emancipatory construct. Instead, one studies when and why identity may/may not inform literary practices. I see this as an attempt to decolonize the gaze, which also involves moving beyond the simple opposition between the hegemonic center and the rebellious, yet subordinate, margins.

However, I also notice in this project a conscious critical restraint. The critic does not wish to criticize authors and texts for their hypocrisy, lies, or “not speaking directly;” she does not want to “prove” that some of them are conservative or “play it safe.” Unlike Czapliński, for example, who unmasks the traditionalist “identity” of women’s prose at the turn of the century. Instead of a revisionist critique of the text, Galant calls for a revisionist critique of (one’s) reading practices.

²⁵Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 46–47.

²⁶Galant, *Zwroty krytyczne*, 52.

I also understand that her conscious decision not to express judgments on the subjectivity inscribed in the text – especially considering the critic’s dreams of subversion and revolution – is an essential element of her strategy of taking a “step back.” A strategy that is (and we are taking a paradoxical step back here as well) an exercise in bias. In a different text, Galant writes:

[l]ocation is not a task or a duty. The entanglements of politics and identity, described by Adrienne Rich [...], offer us clues – when we speak/write, we practice partiality, believing that an impartial compartment in the matrix exists is one of its (matrix’s) tricks. [...] To locate oneself means to layer oneself. To take on autobiographical, methodological, ideological contexts [...] and – necessarily – to speak from the center of locality.²⁷

Moving around instead of searching for the “promised land,” “layering” instead of taking root – the spatial metaphors also testify to a change in how feminist reading is practiced and, more broadly, in how feminist literary criticism is produced.

Agnieszka Gajewska’s communities of the differend

Interestingly, Agnieszka Gajewska in *Czego może oduczyć nas feminizm?* [What can feminism un-teach us?],²⁸ a talk delivered at the 2nd Academic Feminist Congress in 2011, also began with questions about the limits of feminist literary criticism. She explained how during a “meet the author” event a woman reader judged a woman writer and the literary text only in terms of living up to her emancipatory expectations. Gajewska quotes Julia Fiedorczuk’s *Biała Ofelia* [White Ophelia] to criticize the schematic forms of feminist reading practices, which lead to the stabilization of meanings, interpretative predictability, and the reproduction of sterile dichotomies within the closed masculine-feminine system. By combining this satirical image of misreading with the rhetoric of “going to confession,” Gajewska wanted to protest against a model of literary criticism (not only feminist literary criticism, any form of literary criticism) in which the power of the critic is built on the failures (sins) of the literary text. A critique of the text which emphasizes its conservative or traditional aspects is a narcissistic and phallic spectacle of the “I,” in which the reader refers to universal truth, or rather a truth constructed by them as universal. Such a reading puts an end to what, drawing on François Lyotard, Gajewska places at the center of anti-phallogocentric interpretive practices, namely, the differend (in) reading.

Gajewska defines it as “a dispute that is not supposed to lead to a resolution but is supposed to remain a critical movement, it ‘should express doubts and raise doubts, and not create illusions of universal truths, which after all serve to totalize and annihilate the heterogeneous.’”²⁹ Such

²⁷Arleta Galant, “Parafrazy Ingi Iwasiów” [Paraphrases of Inga Iwasiów], in: Inga Iwasiów dla zaawansowanych. Studia, eseje, relacje [Inga Iwasiów for advanced students. Studies, essays, reports], ed. Maciej Duda, Aleksandra Krukowska, Piotr Krupiński (Szczecin–Poznań: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego i Stowarzyszenia Czasu Kultury, 2023), 207.

²⁸Agnieszka Gajewska, “Czego może oduczyć nas feminizm?” [What can feminism un-teach us?], *Women Online Writing 3* (2014): 58–67.

²⁹Gajewska, “Czego może oduczyć nas feminizm?”, 62–63. At this point the critic quotes Lyotard’s translator, Bogdan Banasiak. See: Bogdan Banasiak, “Poróżnienie, albo «zadanie myślenia»” [The differend or ‘the goal of thinking’] in: Jean-François Lyotard, *Poróżnienie* [The Differend], trans. Bogdan Banasiak (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2010), xxxiv.

a form of dispute,³⁰ unlike agon which refers to the concept of the truth, has a chance to introduce “adoctrinal pragmatism” to feminist literary criticism, governed by the logic of an “inverted confession.” Recurring ethical questions “would refer particularly to critics who read and not to critics who write,” while reading itself “would not be a judgment, would not call for repentance, a confession of sins, but show the traps of literary criticism and judgements, fundamentally based on, as must be pointed out, phallogocentric rhetorical tricks.”³¹

Interestingly, this strategy of the differend – which I would describe as actively searching for difference – involves, among other things, actively abandoning the center of feminist literary criticism, which for many years has been “the woman.” Gajewska questions the seemingly obvious fact that feminist literary criticism should place the female experience, the female text, the female authorship, and the female language at the center. Moreover, she suggests that moving towards the borderlands of masculinity, queerness, otherness, and monstrosity is a move that is not only possible but also necessary in order to decolonize feminist discourse.

Feminist literary criticism focused on female characters, female narratives, and women’s writing is confined to the panopticon of patriarchal clichés. This conflict between the female/male world, often accompanied by the heterosexual/homosexual binary, renders us predictable and easily definable. We cannot move into the ambiguous, the transgressive, the uncanny, and the hermaphroditic. When we do not engage with these monstrous issues, we annihilate otherness, difference and subordinate cultural practices to political requirements that are not – as a result – emancipatory.³²

So, does Arleta Galant write about the “politics of location” in opposition to the blurring of difference (including gender difference)? Does Agnieszka Gajewska encourage decentralization in order to resist identity politics?

Although both critics, in my opinion, diagnose the problem differently – according to Galant, the problem of Polish literary criticism is the constant blurring or dilution of identity categories, while for Gajewska the problem is their normativization – their literary criticism projects defend the travelling concept of difference and its double effect: difference creates a community of readers (thanks to differentiation) and at the same time protects this community from homogenization (thanks to the differend).

This is clearly visible when we compare the previously quoted fragment from Gajewska’s talk with another one, delivered literally a few months later, during the conference held at the first Gryfia Literary Award (in 2012). Gajewska emphasizes the importance of the “salvific conflict of interpretations,” but from a different (and, as one might think, opposite) perspective. The 2012 talk, entitled *Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku* [Feminist friendly criticism

³⁰Of course, feminist literary critics may approach dispute/agon differently. Krystyna Kłosińska, in her model of symptomatic reading inspired by Jane Gallop’s theoretical work, encourages the woman-reader to question the text and to read it “against the woman-author.” Krystyna Kłosińska, “Feministyczna krytyka literacka wobec pisania kobiet i jej pułapki” [Feminist literary criticism of women’s writing and its pitfalls], FA-art 3 (2012): 3–13.

³¹Gajewska, “Czego może nauczyć nas feminizm?”, 67.

³²Gajewska, “Czego może nauczyć nas feminizm?”, 62.

in 2012],³³ emphasizes the value of a close, intimate relationship between women in literature (in their respective roles as writers, readers, and critics). Referring to Janice Raymond's *A passion for friends: A philosophy of female friendship*, Gajewska talks about the importance of female friendship which she sees as a remedy for particularly painful experiences – on the one hand, the cultural alienation and victimization of women in a male-centric society and, on the other hand, the inevitable conflicts within the sisterhood.

One might think that Gajewska encourages us this time to connect at the level of identity with (an)other (woman), but it turns out that in “friendly criticism” the herstorical work of reclaiming the visibility of bonds between women and finding support in them during “crises of difference” does not involve giving up one's voice, one's otherness. On the contrary, it allows one to understand one's positioning better:

I share my doubts, I evaluate, I disagree, trying to communicate: I care about what you do, think, write. I do not ignore my female friend-author, I quote, I argue.³⁴

This polemical mode is a “different way of explaining and arguing” that requires moving beyond the framework of the “narcissistic spectacle of the ‘I,’” forcing one to “repeat one's obsessions.”³⁵ As such, despite the assumed distinctness of the “I” and “the other,” “[f]riendly criticism has little in common with the critical literary agon. I do not argue with the author, I search, I wonder why something sounds uncomfortable and foreign, I verify my ethical views, I think about my own critical tools, which I should probably abandon since their obscure the view.”³⁶

Although the two quoted texts by Gajewska encourage us to adopt two seemingly different critical attitudes (of the differend and of the reconciliatory respectively), they meet halfway at a point where the critic consciously resists reading literature through her emancipatory, deconstructionist, or any other expectations. Which, of course, does not at all invalidate questions about the politics and ethics of such a reading, nor does it silence the questions about community, familiarity, and otherness.

In my reading, it is in this unusual place that Arleta Galant's project of a post-dependent located reading and Agnieszka Gajewska's model of the friendly differend meet. Both consciously take a “step back” in order to, as Nancy K. Miller put it in *Arachnologies*, overread. I also read it in terms of both critics doing auto-meta-critical work on their respective interpretive tools, in the horizon of which defending one's perspective on the world and the text is but one of the possibilities. The other is refraining from it. Perhaps ultimately it is all about searching for difference also in oneself and not only establishing it between oneself and the outside?

³³Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku” [Feminist friendly criticism in 2012], *Pogranicza* 2 (2012): 81–85.

³⁴Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku”, 83.

³⁵Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku”, 85.

³⁶Gajewska, “Feministyczna krytyka przyjacielska w 2012 roku”, 84.

In these flows of meanings between sisterhood – friendship – agon – dispute – the differend, Izabela Filipiak's comments on how ambivalent feminism is towards tradition – since it may be both traditionalist and anti-traditionalist – echo back. I think that Agnieszka Gajewska's and Arleta Galant's literary criticism projects demonstrate that their goal is not so much to reclaim and colonize areas once appropriated by hegemonic masculinity but to find ways to hear the voices of Others (not only gendered Others), sometimes so radically different that they may even be hostile.³⁷ Looking back remains an important inspiration for both. It helps design practices of resistance to the homogenizing tendencies of all communities, including a community of women. Above all, however, both projects encourage us to move beyond a discursive deadlock in which we are forced to choose between "the spirit of otherness" and "the spirit of identity."

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³⁷Agnieszka Gajewska developed this project in her presentation *Feministyczna miłość wroga – wezwanie filozoficzne* [Feminist love of the enemy – A philosophical call] delivered during the regional conference "Friendship with the Other. Religions-Relations-Attitudes" of the European Society of Women's Theology (ESWTR), which took place in Gniezno from 24 to 27 August 2014. I have not been able to find a paper copy of this talk.

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KEYWORDS

tradition

agon

Agnieszka Gajewska

ABSTRACT:

The article examines changes in the way feminist literary criticism has been practiced in Poland since 2005 in the context of identity politics, location politics, the female tradition, and the female reading community. The author emphasizes the significance of (not only gender-related) “difference,” defined in a non-essentialist, nomadic, and non-antagonistic way, in two feminist literary criticism projects by Arleta Galant and Agnieszka Gajewska respectively. Both critics revise second-wave feminist critical tools and yet remain within the feminist reading community, seeking new non-antagonistic ways of reading the same and the different.

feminist literary criticism

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