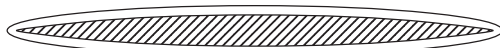


juxtaposition of photos of his father from 1938 and 1941 included in the book.

Waydenfeld and his parents survived these ordeals through ingenuity, resourcefulness, pure hard work, and a certain amount of luck. Using their possessions brought from home and money from their labor, they grew adept at working the Soviet system through bribery to obtain food, medicine, or a place on a train. Waydenfeld describes these experiences with intriguing detail and honesty that make for lively and compelling reading. He discusses his foibles as well as his accomplishments, and admits that because of his youth and strength, life in the forest settlement was not all bad for him—a rare statement for Polish deportees (93). Unlike many Polish survivors of Soviet exile, Waydenfeld recalls his experiences without pathos, in a matter-of-fact tone that does not seek pity. He understands the evils of the Soviet system, but does not treat Soviet citizens with contempt; rather, he evinces sympathy for their plight and their lack of hope. Is this the result of writing sixty years after the events? His personality? Or perhaps his origins and upbringing? Waydenfeld's parents were both Jewish—a fact one learns late in the book, first from the copy of the family's release certificates from the Soviet settlement, and then from his recounting of the discrimination he faced from Polish soldiers on the eve of evacuation from the USSR. Only then, he writes, did he feel like a stranger among the Poles (357). Waydenfeld states only that he is an atheist. His Jewish origins hold no apparent meaning for him; he considers himself a Pole and a patriot. But he does not espouse the fervent Polish nationalism that typically included deeply felt Catholicism and anti-Russian sentiments. Unlike many other Polish memoirists of the deportations to the USSR, Waydenfeld does not attribute his survival to faith in God and nation; instead, he states, "people soon realized that they would perish unless they helped each other" (404). It may be that the lack of attachment to the spiritual aspects of the experience that so often shape Poles' accounts of their ordeals allows Waydenfeld to see and recall with a clarity and level of detail that illuminates more of the everyday existence and hard work of survival of Polish exiles in the Soviet Union. ◇



## Body. Gender. Concentration Camps

*Ciało. Seksualność. Obozy zagłady*, by **Bożena Karwowska**. Kraków: Universitas, 2009. 216 pages. Bibliography, index of names, English summary. ISBN: 97883-242-1344-3. Softcover. In Polish.

### Joanna Niżyńska

The task of analyzing camp literature presents a particular set of challenges, the greatest of which is that it requires the scholar to occupy the positions of explorer and witness simultaneously. Such positionalities may at times become mutually exclusive when the ethics of witnessing clashes with the drive to explore. Bożena Karwowska's recent book *Ciało. Seksualność. Obozy zagłady* (*Body. Gender. Concentration Camps*), published in the Universitas series "Modernizm w Polsce," exemplifies the tactful negotiation of ethical complexities and the analytical approach demanded by the book's grueling subject matter.

The opening chapter, "The Body in the Concentration Camp: The Experience of Stanisław Grzesiuk," focuses on Grzesiuk's memoir *Pięć lat kacetu* (*Five Years in Concentration Camps*, 1958). In her discussion of Grzesiuk's treatment of the body and the theme of homosexuality, Karwowska proposes reading Grzesiuk's memoir via hermeneutic tools offered by feminist critics focusing on slavery in the United States. She adopts a racial discourse of slavery and its notions of bodily hierarchies to discuss a collective of white males striving for survival in the concentration camp universe. Karwowska's employment of the notion of "the theft of the body" as an operative mechanism both of slavery and of the camps allows for a nuanced reading of the typology of the body and its function as an exchange value and a medium of communication in the reality Grzesiuk represents. At the same time, the author shows that reading camp literature through the language of gender and of the body differs from reading it through other transnational categories that, paradoxically, simultaneously universalize and Other the experience. The category of the victim, after all, trumps all other categories, often turning the victim into the body deprived of its idiosyncratic qualities such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Karwowska's book reclaims gender and sexuality as operative categories to offer new, valuable readings of a broad range of texts,

some less well known than others, pertaining to the wartime, the Holocaust and, broadly speaking, camp experience. Avoiding the pitfalls of Holocaust studies that often suffer from an overcautious treatment of the topic, the author skillfully balances her provocative interpretations with respect for her topic.

Books such as this are needed in Polish scholarship. Although generations of Poles have been schooled on the canonic works of the camps and Holocaust literature (e.g., Nałkowska, Szmaglewska, Borowski), it is important to remember that the institutionalization of memory during the communist regime left a heritage of reception that discouraged readings that pluralized experience and subject positions, whether from the ethnic, national, or ethical perspective. Such reception was characterized by the tendency to preserve the totality of victimization (thus the problem with the victim entering the hierarchy of power and survival and the transgressive character of works such as Borowski's); it avoided, at all cost, the risk of being perceived as relativizing Nazi guilt, and, as Karwowska addresses in the book's introduction, it operated according to the "external" (i.e., from outside the barbed wire) morality, which simply could not accommodate the conditions of the camp life.

The book is divided into three parts (whose argumentative trajectory would benefit from titles), which progress from texts that demonstrate the potential and limitations of approaching testimonial writings (with the case studies of Stanisław Grzesiuk, Zofia Romanowiczowa, Seweryna Szmaglewska) in the framework of feminist, gender, and sexuality studies; to texts demonstrating the importance of narratorial positionality for this framework (Maria Dąbrowska, Tadeusz Borowski, Zofia Posmysz); and finally to texts that employ the category of bodily experience in the light of posttraumatic cultural traces. This last part is characterized by a broader perspective of the postmemorial generation and employs a variety of canonic and noncanonic literary and visual works (e.g., Ewa Stachniak, Edward Munk, the memoirs of women from Gdańsk/Danzig) in order to show how the notions of, for example, rape and prostitution employed in the representation of the wartime situations interact with these notions' "everyday" semantics. The coherence of such grouping is blurred by the discussion of Maria Dąbrowska's experience of widowhood in her *Diary* from the interwar period in Part Two. Although the author explains in the introduction that her discussion of Dąbrowska illustrates the process of the sexualization of the

narrator's position in the context of representation of death and loss, the discussion of Dąbrowska's process of mourning stands out awkwardly in a book focusing on extreme wartime experiences. On the other hand, the same problematics of positionality make perfect sense in Karwowska's poignant and innovative interpretation of Borowski's "letters to Maria" as works "written from the perspective of a man in love."

The title of the book in Polish is misleading, since it suggests that the book focuses on "death camps" and thus operates in the framework of Holocaust studies, while in fact Karwowska tests her analytical apparatus against representations of several categories of traumatic experiences (e.g., death camps, concentration camps, labor camps, wartime rapes of women and men who were not necessarily Jewish). Although it is clear for the reader that the main authorial intention lies in opening up new interpretative horizons by employing the framework of body, gender, and sexuality to discuss the self-contained community of the (broadly understood) camps, it would be helpful to signal differentiation between the various traumatic communities she discusses and the influence of these differentiations on the treatment of gender and sexuality. In fact, in the English summary of the argument that concludes the book, the notion of "obozy zagłady" is translated as "concentration camps," which is more appropriate to the content of the book but misleading in relation to the historical distinction between concentration and death camps.

The entire book, however, indicates a scholar who thinks palimpsestically and whose initial interpretative intuition resurfaces in a layered and complex engagement with her subjects. The palimpsestic nature of camp writing (in the chapter "Text on the Shoah as Palimpsest") is addressed on the basis of a case study of *The Woman Passenger* (*Pasażerka*, 1963), an acclaimed film directed by Andrzej Munk. The very same film becomes intertwined in the broader analysis of the treatment of German women in postwar Polish literature ("Antagonistic 'National' Identities and Female Memories. German Women in Polish Postwar Literature") where it becomes a counterpart to the Canadian novel *Necessary Lies* (2000), by the Polish émigré writer Ewa Stachniak. The introduction of Stachniak's book enables Karwowska to expand her earlier analysis of the palimpsestic strategies of focalizing memory through the German and Polish main characters of Munk's classic film into the notions of postmemory and generational transference in Stachniak's contemporary novel.

Overall, *Ciało. Seksualność. Obozy zagłady* is a theory-rich book, informed by such critics as J. Kristeva, T. Moi, E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, b. hooks, G. Agamben, R. Barthes, F. Ankersmit, J. Derrida, and G. Genette, and it puts close readings and theoretical reflections in dialogue with each other. It provides a new perspective on issues pertaining to the gendering of radical experience and its representation. I can imagine this book as a useful pedagogical tool particularly in seminars that emphasize comparative approaches to literature and war writing. I can also imagine that Karwowska's findings on camp literature may be further developed in a growing Polish scholarship on the problematics of gender and sexuality in the context of ethnicity and nationality. What I value most about Bożena Karwowska's work is her ability to resist redemptive interpretations and to unsettle her reader while maintaining an empathetic relationship with the texts she discusses. ♦

## Primeval and Other Times

**By Olga Tokarczuk. Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.** Prague: Twisted Spoon Press (info@twistedspoon.com), 2010. 248 pages. ISBN 978-80-86264-35-6. Paper. \$15.50.

### Chad Heltzel

Late in Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Primeval and Other Times* (*Prawiek i inne czasy*, 1996), one of its primary characters, while inspecting a family tomb, reads aloud words inscribed over the graveyard's exit: "God sees. Time escapes. Death pursues. Eternity waits." This terse message (a quote from a seventeenth-century religious poem) aptly encapsulates the novel's themes. As characters in a Polish village called Primeval experience simple everyday pleasures alongside major struggles and tragedies of the twentieth century, many begin to question God's place in their lives. While the characters generally don't question His existence, they do wonder about His role in human life after creation. He sees, but does He intervene? Does He cause tragedies to happen? Or are humans alone responsible for their fate? All we can know for sure is that time marches inexorably on, and the mystery of the afterlife awaits. While this may seem existentialist, the novel is much more expansive. The questions about our existence are explored more with wonder than with negativist resignation. Ultimately,

Tokarczuk is interested in the ways humans become connected to each other and to their world, and it is this idea that informs *Primeval and Other Times*.

Philosophical questions regarding God's role play out most significantly in chapters explaining The Game, a sort of elaborate board game given to Squire Popielski who "hadn't stopped believing in God, but God and all the rest of it were becoming rather flat and expressionless" (36). After playing The Game, he becomes obsessed with its intricate rules and unraveling the cryptic book that accompanies it. Subsequent chapters devoted to the text of the game provide different possibilities for why God created the world and His subsequent relation to His creation. By drawing attention to the process of creation and whether God has abandoned his work or retains control of it, Tokarczuk emphasizes the passage of time. Certainly the novel privileges temporality as an organizing construct. Chapter titles like "The Time of Misia" (one of the novel's main characters) direct attention to characters' actions and behavior as they affect subsequent events in the novel (emphasizing a continuous and timeless chain of actions), rather than focusing on elaborate character studies that might anchor actions to a specific time and place. Even places and objects ("The Time of Primeval," "The Time of the House") are introduced temporally and implicitly as concepts that are well established and whose ideas still remain significant.

One must also take into account Tokarczuk's own training and interest in Jungian psychology that moves away from purely theological or philosophical discussions of existence to arguing the existence of archetypal patterns. A Jungian interest in the collective unconscious allows Tokarczuk to explore whether characters can truly share experiences. Certainly, in a world wracked by wars and economic and political struggles, and one where God may be absent, people are likely to feel isolated. At one point a character is described "[lying] on his back in the rough, elusive present, and [feeling] that with every passing second he was dissolving into non-existence" (173). Later, as characters approach death, they worry about how they can leave lasting impressions: "What they feared most was that in the fervor of dying, the separating of the soul from the body or the fading of the biological structure of the brain, Misia Boska would be gone forever, all her recipes would be gone. . . and finally, her thoughts, her words, the events she had taken part in, as ordinary as her life" (234–35). The passage of time and death's inevitability seemingly render