

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

SITE: POLAND

**Transcript of Agnieszka Graff
Interviewers: Sławomira Walczewska and Beata Kozak**

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Agnieszka Graff was born in 1970 in Warsaw, Poland. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Language and Literature from Amherst College in the United States in 1993 and later studied literature at Oxford University in Great Britain. She was an assistant professor of English literature at the University of Warsaw between 1995 and 2000 where she translated Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" in 1997. Since 2000, she has been an assistant professor at the Center for American Studies at the University of Warsaw. Graff published her first book, *Świat bez kobiet (A World without Women)* in 2001.

Sławomira Walczewska founded the Women's Foundation (eFKa) in Kraków in 1995. In 1999, Walczewska published *Ladies, Knights and Feminists: Feminist Discourse in Poland*, the first Polish book about women's emancipation from a historical and a cultural perspective. As a feminist activist and a scholar, she is interested in international women's movements and is firmly committed to understanding various differences and intersections of global feminisms.

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)*.

Agnieszka Graff
June 12, 2005

SW: Today is the 12th of June, 2005. Agnieszka Graff will be talking about herself and about her feminism. Could you tell us how feminism, your feminism, fits into your life? When did it come up? You are one of the best known feminists in Poland. Can you tell us about yourself?

AG: The fact that one is a public person causes this kind of a dissonance that... you know, you don't know any more what is your "media snout," you know this official, public face, and what is personal. I'm a bit disconcerted about this, but I'll try to stay away from my "media snout" and talk the way I feel about myself. Well, let me start with my childhood, let's say, and then I'll quite quickly... So well, I come from a Warsaw intelligentsia family. My parents are both philosophers. When I was a kid, I had a bit of a hard time explaining to other children what my parents did. They're philosophers, so it's really unclear what exactly they do. They think, and actually their marriage was like a continuous graduate seminar, where various abstract topics were discussed. And perhaps, the issue of gender didn't quite exist in my imagination as a family problem until my parents started their divorce proceedings. And they started the proceedings... later on, I found out it was actually very early, when I was still a little kid, but my awareness of that fact started when I was something like ten, maybe eleven years old, and, well, this was the moment I became my mother's ally in the situation when she was abandoned by my father, and he, well, he felt somehow dominated by her. And in general, this motif of what... who dominated over whom and who had a right to dominate was important even though, probably like most people in this situation, I didn't think about it in collective or political categories but just in terms of my parents, who both had very difficult personalities, and who also used me in this many-year war between them. And I had an opportunity to remember my childhood in this... in these short sketches for a book about girls, for which I once wrote a piece about the third wave of feminism.¹ And, to my surprise, the text that turned out was actually about how sad my childhood was. And that's probably true. I mean I was a terribly sad little girl, about whom many people later said... that I was this kind of a sad kid with turned down corners of my mouth, terribly serious and reflective and a bit kind of responsible for the fate of this world. Well, which, of course, meant I was... I felt responsible for my parents' marriage. When I was eleven, we left for the States. My father got a Fulbright at Amherst College, this kind of a rather prestigious college on the East Coast. I found myself in an American school and... well, it was a very difficult moment also because in 1981, in Poland, martial law broke out² and we were supposed

¹ *W poszukiwaniu malej dziewczynki (In Search of a Little Girl)*. Ed. I. Kowalczyk and E. Zierkiewicz. Konsola Press 2003. Graff's essay is titled "Feministki-corki feministek, czyli trzecia fala dobija do brzegu" ("Feminists—Daughters of Feminists or the Third Wave Hits the Shore").

² **Martial Law:** limitations on civil liberties implemented on December 13, 1981, in order to stop social activism aiming at fundamental reforms of the social and political system in the Polish People's Republic. It was confirmed by the National Council's (Rada Państwa) decree, even though issuing decrees was unconstitutional during Parliament's (Sejm) session. Prepared since August 1980, it was justified by a threat of coup d'état and take-over of power by the opposition gathered around "Solidarity," economic collapse, and a possibility of Soviet intervention. The chief administrative organ during Martial Law was the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON), led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Martial Law regulations limited basic civil liberties, introduced curfew, and suspended all activities by social organizations and trade unions. Martial Law militarized main branches of the economy,

to be there for a year, but when we saw tanks on TV and... well, and Jaruzelski's face³, there was a family vote, which decided we would stay another year. And well, it was very hard on me, because at that point, my parents weren't practically talking to each other any more, so here I was in a foreign country, foreign planet really and in the house where everything was so... where the atmosphere was very tense and unpleasant. And I would spend a lot of time up on the tree, hiding from this terrible family atmosphere. But at the same time, I was becoming a bilingual child and... while I most likely wasn't aware of it then... also a bicultural one, and this is a certain key element in my life that I always looked at myself from this kind of position of duality. I was never quite at home in Poland, and, of course, I was never at home in the States, either. We came back after these two years, and then it all came to the ultimate split between my parents. I remained with my mother, and I was really close to her, in a kind of a relationship, which I now assess as toxic, in a sense, or in some way destructive. But, of course, then I believed she was simply my best friend and that I was protecting her from the world and she was protecting me from the world. And... and I remember that in high school, I figured out that my friends wouldn't tell me about themselves, because they were afraid I'd repeat everything to my mother. And it was like a strong... like a cold shower for me, a warning that something wasn't right, that it was all too close. And... and I'm a bit afraid of this mothers-daughters theme. It kind of scares me a bit and it also somewhat attracts me. It is a very important and most likely the most difficult feminist theme about the ambivalence of this relationship and also about its great power. And... my mother is a very strong person, but, well, very intellectual in her attitude toward the world. I mean I think she has limited contact with her emotional life, but she was always a very... a huge authority for me, and I remember a moment when I realized I didn't at all imagine the world without her. I mean she's this absolute point of reference, and if she died, I would generally just fall apart. And this was the moment I was trying to leave this relationship; I was past thirty at that point, and the moment of taking care of some kind of... of, well, my own emotional life away from her. But she's absolutely the key person in my life, and I'm still struggling with this. And... she was the one who sent me to college in the States... I'm saying this with full awareness that it wasn't my choice; it was her... a fulfillment of her dream. She was an academic from a country that was very hard to leave. She's always been very ambitious, till today, and she's always felt that if she had been born in the States... if she had been born in the West, her books would have been read all over the world. I remember when she was

banned travel, and introduced censorship of correspondence and summary judicial process. Activists from "Solidarity" and political opposition, as well as some politicians from the pre-August 1980 regime, were interned (approximately 10 thousand people in all). The remaining "Solidarity" activists went underground, organizing demonstrations and strikes in factories and coal mines, suppressed by riot police (ZOMO), which often used heavy military equipment (9 coal miners were killed in the Wujek Coal Mine in December 1981, and there were fatalities in Lublin in August 1982). Demonstration participants, underground activists, and "Solidarity" members were fired from their jobs, harassed, and coerced to sign "declarations of loyalty." With the collaboration of Secret Police, employees of the judicial system, education, public administration and mass media were being vetted. The society at large reacted with organizing a boycott of all organizations and institutions controlled by the authorities; underground press and publishing ensured the independent flow of information. The Catholic Church undertook a broad campaign of helping those persecuted by the government. The underground "Solidarity" was receiving moral and material support from international organizations and labor centers. As a result of a deteriorating economic and political situation, martial law was repealed on July 22, 1983 (but repressive practices and some parts of the legislation survived till 1989), and in February 1992, the Sejm decided its implementation to have been illegal.

³ **Jaruzelski, Wojciech**: the Prime Minister and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party since 1981. General Jaruzelski's speeches about implementing martial law were broadcast on the radio and TV early morning shows, starting at 6:00 a.m. on the 13th of December 1981.

comparing herself to Jonathan Culler, this key American literary theorist, who wrote a book about structuralism the same year her book about structuralism was published. And... and I think hers is better. Objectively speaking, she simply did a better job, but his book has been translated into scores of languages and is the main textbook, well, because her book appeared in Poland and his in the States. And this sense of coming from Eastern Europe, which is a form of intellectual and academic marginalization, has always been hanging over me. And another thing, also hanging over me a bit, was this kind of... obligation to overcome this destiny. I was supposed to overcome it by leaving for college to the States, to the same place my father had gone to before, and it was Amherst College. I got a full scholarship, and I became a kind of a token there... a token East European, well, the only East European, on this American campus, who was supposed to give rich American kids some sense that they were living in a multicultural community. I was the only Pole, and there was one Indian woman and a German guy, and well, a few people from Africa. I mean it was the kind of mix that was supposed to provide these young Americans with the sense that they had pluralism and diversity, as it used to be called then. But it was a very amusing role to play, and since the very beginning I was quite skeptical, but, well, it was a huge life opportunity as well. And... and I think that the year 1988, when I left for the States, was a major break-through in my entire life. It was because it meant a complete cut-off from the life I was painstakingly trying to build in Poland... I was in high school at that point, so it was about my emotional life, including love life, and also political life. And suddenly, I was completely torn out of all this, and the States were like the other side of the world. And it became this kind of a caesura and this kind of a big cut in my life, and in a way, I tend to perceive all my later biography as an attempt to sew these elements of by life back together. And my nick name in high school was "sandwich," which came from the fact that a hamburger is a sandwich, and hamburger is like a symbol of America. And I've always had this impression that a sandwich is something like two slices and something in-between but it's not very clear what it is. That means there has always been this duality about where I'm from. In the States, I'm Polish, and in Poland of the 1980's, I was the one who had been to the States and spoke English. Well, as a teenager, I gave private tutoring sessions in English, which was quite unusual in Poland... And this sense of alienation, which has followed me all my life, is also related to the fact that I am of Jewish descent. I mean, my father is Jewish and a Holocaust survivor, and this Jewish part of my identity was never clearly articulated at home. Much, much later, after my father had already immigrated to the States, I started talking to him about it. Well... So let me now come back to the time before I went to the States... to the moment of my... of this life melodrama, which I later re-interpreted in some feminist categories. So... as a very emotional teenager, actually a very religious teenager... I was in the Oasis Movement⁴ and in the Catholic Intelligentsia Club⁵. As a pre-teen, I had visions where I talked to Virgin Mary in the forest, so I was a very excitable person, with a very rich imagination... I was writing poems and so on. And as a sixteen-year-old, I fell in love in this completely demonic way... with this kind of complete merging into one, with a very demonic young man, whom today I see as slightly psychopathic, but at the time, he was simply a beautiful young man with green eyes and great plans to save the world. He was an

⁴ **Oasis Movement:** A youth association, whose task was to popularize Catholic faith among young people.

⁵ **The Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK):** created in 1956 in Warsaw. It gathers members of the intelligentsia who want to consciously experience their faith among laity. It is independent from the government and from the Church hierarchy. It doesn't support any political option but undertakes systematic reflections on the political culture. Its activities are inspired by the Second Vatican Council's documents.

opposition fighter. I mean he was a member of the Polish Solidarity opposition⁶, of the youth group the Fighting Youth Federation⁷, and later on, of the Independent Student Association⁸. He was one year older than I and was involved in publishing these various underground papers... In retrospect, I think it was a bit childish... it was all like a kid's game, but then it seemed like a big revolution. I also remember giving an interview, which I still have somewhere in my drawer, to another little opposition publication, different from ours, and which was titled "I'm an Opposition Fighter's Girl-Friend." And it was... it was a serious part of my identity. I remember situations, for example, when other opposition guys would hit on me, and since he was an important guy, he was the boss of our group, they would get a beating because they dared impinge on my dignity, or my virtue, so to say. But at the same time, there were girls in the group, whose rank was much lower than mine, who were sold off, for example... I mean I remember this... and it was always quite shocking to me then, but more from a catholic and moral position than from a feminist one... since feminism came later... but I remember the girl who was sold off by one young, seventeen year old, opposition guy to another for... for a case of beer. And she later found out about it. I mean it was... the way it happened was that the first one broke up with her and the other one hit on her and she became his girl-friend, and much later, she found out that a case of beer was also involved in this... this transaction. And it seemed immoral, or sinful, to me at the time. And... and now, I see it from a completely different, feminist perspective. And well... as an opposition fighter's girl-friend, I was experiencing some... well, an awakening, erotic and emotional, and it all involved a high level of emotional tension that I can't even access today. It involved suicide attempts when one of us would say, "I don't love you any more." It involved some ritualistic ideas... when there was an exchange of blood. It involved some scenes... actually kind of sadistic when we'd lock each other up in some awful rooms. Well... these were things... most likely borderline psychosis... And when I left... when I said, on Christmas, that I was leaving for the States, and then there was the New Year's of 1988, when my love... made a suicide attempt in a very dramatic, theatrical way, which appears in my nightmares to this day, and in general, New Year's Eve is still a rather terrible day for me. And I can't even judge today whether it was a good thing that I left. It was... it was a horrible experience. It was a sense of this monstrous loneliness, of breaking off the most important bond in my life, but I think that if I hadn't left then, most likely today I would have had four children

⁶ **Solidarity: Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" ("Solidarność"), NSZZ "Solidarity"** came into being in August and September 1980 with a wave of social discontent about the deteriorating economic situation and the methods of governing the country used by the communist authorities. In the latter half of 1980, workers' protests took up a form of strikes, at the beginning in small industrial centers and later in bigger cities. The climactic point happened in the Sea Coast region, with the occupation strike organized in the Gdańsk Shipyard on August 13, 1980. The majority of enterprises from Gdańsk and the Sea Coast region joined in and organized solidarity strikes, including the Szczecin Shipyard. The strike was also joined by the Coal Mine in Jastrzębie. On September 17, 1980, at the meeting of strike committees' and founding committees' representatives in Gdansk, NSZZ "Solidarity" was constituted, and the delegates also elected the National Coordinating Commission with its chairman Lech Wałęsa. At the moment of registration, the Union had approximately 10 million members (80% of all employed).

⁷ **The Fighting Youth Federation:** created in 1984 in Warsaw. It gathered young people who wanted to fight against the political system in Poland. After a broadcast in the Free Europe Radio, local groups started appearing in other cities, in Wrocław, Krakow, Gdansk and Lodz. The Federation members were mostly high school students, but also college students and working youth. They brought out school publications, newspapers, and leaflets, which they also distributed. They distributed banned books and participated in street protests and in organizing strikes. Some participants were put in prison for their activism. The organization dissolved in 1991.

⁸ **NZS** – the Independent Student Association – was created at the end of September 1980, but was officially registered as late as the 17th of February, 1981, after a wave of student strikes.

and I would have been tired of my life and perhaps divorced... since the level of emotion was such that it wouldn't most likely have lasted... divorced wife of a frustrated opposition fighter... since 1989 was around the corner, the opposition movement was coming to its end, and he didn't finish college and our lives went separate ways. But till today, I still believe that it was the greatest love of my life and the kind of experience that I have to constantly re-interpret and tell myself about again and again. And... and my feminism, as a deep intellectual and emotional experience, came at the moment when... I was already in college, and it was after reading Virginia Woolf, among others, for the class taught by this... her name was I think Michelle Barrett, and she was a gender studies professor at Amherst. And at the end of this class I wrote an autobiographical essay, which started with "It was a dark and stormy night," and it was about this episode when the love of my life made this theatrical suicide attempt to stop me from going my own way, and it was about my huge sense of guilt related to this, and about the whole mythology of the opposition and of... of the role of the opposition fighter's woman and a total re-interpretation of this. I mean I realized how this whole thing was entangled with my reading, reading of romance novels like *Gone with the Wind*, or... I don't know... like *The Wuthering Heights* [sic], which was the absolutely key novel for me in my early youth. And I realized... from this great distance at the other side of the Atlantic... how much things that I had believed to be the most authentic, my own, coming from the gut, my most sublime, intimate and personal things, how much it was all loaded with cultural patterns, and how these patterns were really kitsch, grotesque actually, you know, with this kind of dark, stormy night, and destructive, too. And this was a turning point. I still keep this essay somewhere, and I have a feeling that it's some kind of... well, it's not a good piece, and I would never publish it, but at the same time, it was the key for me... And I think it was... It was... It must have been 1992, since it was during my sophomore year, and it was... it was also a kind of a beginning of my later feminist path, which to a large extent was about a personal attempt to re-interpret... well... the Polish patriotism and the sense of victimization... and the kind of destiny, this Polish loftiness and this myth of a Polish man, who is macho in its cynical-desperate version, very different from the American macho, for example. And this macho's woman is supposed to constantly save him from his dark depression and from cynicism, but in the end, he... drinking vodka with the guys, he will still say it's because all women are sluts. And my boyfriend, my great love, used to say this, too. And this love haunted me for years, since I would meet him over the summer, when I was back from college. It was always in secret... these were totally secret meetings, somewhere in our totally secret meeting places in the Warsaw Old Town. And year after year, I had a feeling that the only love... since I believed it was the only love that could happen to me in my life... that this love was my destiny. It was a bit like in the *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; I knew this love was impossible, that this man was from another planet, that my life had gone in a completely different direction, but at the same time, in the back of my mind, there was this deeply rooted feeling that I was worthless without him. Even when I was already a feminist. It was a very strong feeling of being charmed by a great love and about the need to fulfill this destiny. I think I managed to overcome this only a few years ago, and it wasn't really thanks to feminism but thanks to psychotherapy. I mean I realized more clearly how this image of a man who will save me... what kind of connection this has to my parents, my father, to the fact that he left my mother and... and... and that it was simply a very complex story. Well... and so... I came back from college, from the States, and later from England, since I studied for a year in England as well... I came back to Poland... against the will of my parents, who believed it was some kind

of... and actually they called it that: a professional hara-kiri⁹, when a person working on her Ph.D. at Oxford and had all the chances to...and I was always a top student, I had all A's, I was first... I graduated from Amherst as a valedictorian, so I had a real foundation for an academic career. I got in to Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge, and simply there were no better opportunities for an English major. And after all this, I came back to Poland, meaning nowhere, to the place which is a total backwater for English studies. And... and... well, everybody was looking at me like I was sort of crazy, but I never had a feeling that I made a mistake. I never felt good in the States; I never had a feeling that teaching American modernism or English modernism to American students was my historic mission, my mission in life. I wanted to be an intellectual in Poland, and I didn't come back to become a feminist. Feminism was one of many parts of my intellectual and psychological identity... acquired in the States. Thanks to my friendships and thanks to my classes and thanks to the fact that in 1989 I participated in the huge march in Washington, D.C.... a march for reproductive rights¹⁰, and I didn't anticipate that it would become so important... I wanted to be a literature theorist. After I came back from the States I still wrote my Ph.D. on Joyce, on a kind of old momentum, in which the word "woman" doesn't even come up. Now it amuses and amazes me that it's so completely deprived of any gender issues, but it wasn't the most important thing for me. It became most important... as a result of contrast. I mean as a result of some shock related to my return to Poland, to the Poland which had already become democratic, since in 1995, it was already the new Poland, very different from the one in my memories, and in this Polish democracy, there was no room at all for thinking about women's rights. And it was shocking to me. And it wasn't that I came up with the idea that there could be some room for women; it was a shock for me that it wasn't there, since I came back from this progressive America... I don't mean to say that America as a whole is progressive, but I was on the East Coast, where feminism is an obvious part of any debate. And I found myself in Poland, where women were constantly... well... ridiculed and treated with condescension, and I had a need to interpret this situation, to understand this situation while weaving into it my double... and perhaps even triple personality and kind of counting into it this sense of estrangement related to the fact that step by step, simultaneously, I was discovering my Jewishness... So my feminism is at the cross-roads, national, civic and political. I mean it is also woven into this genealogy of the democratic, but also very patriarchal, youth opposition.

SW: Was this difference between what things were like in the States and what you found in Poland really so big?

AG: It was. I mean, above all else, it was about the fact that I considered myself brainy. I was really a brain. I read Heidegger and Joyce, I wrote my dissertation on *Finnegan's Wake*, I was a child of two philosophers, and at that point, I already considered myself as... I was quite arrogant intellectually, I think, after returning from the States and I simply considered myself an eminent intellectual. I was better than most of the guys in college, and they knew it. I was like a star in college. I taught this big literary theory seminar at Oxford, where mostly men attended, and we worked on deconstruction theory, deconstruction of deconstruction, deconstruction of deconstruction of deconstruction; it was like a game of abstractions. And for me it was like some kind of... it was my identity. And then I found myself in Poland, where in the social circle of my

⁹ **Hara-kiri**: suicide by slashing the abdomen.

¹⁰ The march to Washington, which had above one million participants, was organized as the "March for Women's Lives."

intellectual friends, I was, above all, a girl. And I was supposed to flirt and play... and participate in all these social arrangements, in which girls pretend to be dumber than they are, so that guys can be stars. And I started feeling really estranged and I couldn't adjust to that. I remember the moment when I started referring to myself with the word "feminist" to provoke them and to do something about what seemed to me a fundamentally false situation. So this observation about social estrangement came first, since I was always socially ambitious. Even though I never managed to be very popular in high school, later on, in college, I started succeeding in this, and now, all of a sudden, in Poland, my social popularity was supposed to be about... well... about self-depreciation. I was supposed to gain points in this social hierarchy of Warsaw, among people who were philosophers, sociologists, from the former opposition, you know, and there was some shuffling, but basically I was coming back to my old social group. And it was a very sexist group even though they didn't perceive themselves as such, of course, since in general, there was simply no language in Poland for this. And I started looking for feminists. I remember I got Bożena Umińska's¹¹ phone number from Piotr Sommer, this poet, whose creative writing course I took while still at Amherst. He's a Polish poet who ended up in the States at the same time I did, and he's a great authority figure for me. By the way, I wrote a lot of poems when I was in college... and later on, I just stopped completely. They were perhaps related to my longing for Poland and experiencing depression. And I got this phone number of a feminist; I remember I wrote it under "f" in my calendar, and it was Bożena Umińska's number. And I went to Bożena Umińska's house, and I remember this feeling of relief, of being at home when I sat down at her kitchen table. And I felt this was it. I felt she was the person of great warmth but who was also treating her intellectual life seriously. And she treated me seriously as a person, who is interesting, and as a young intellectual and a feminist and a Jew. I think it was thanks to Bożena, to a large extent, that I started opening up to my Jewishness. I noticed that I felt so good in her house, because she was raised... somehow shaped by this Polish, non-religious, left-wing Jewish social milieu, most likely related to Bund¹² early on, and that this is something... that this is the same milieu my father comes from. And it was the tradition completely forgotten in my home. My mother wanted to protect me from anti-Semitism, so she signed me up for this Catholic intelligentsia group, sent me to religion classes, and it took me a long time to figure out what was going on. And thanks to Bożena, I started feeling at home with feminist thinking and accepting, though without very deep probing, my Jewish identity. It's... it was somehow connected. And Bożena, I think, gave me the address of PSF¹³, which was already falling apart at this point. It was a small association, Polish Feminist Association, and there were just a few people there, and it was already dissolving and falling apart, and there was this meeting, attended by some girls, who really wanted to do something. And it was in Warsaw. It must have been 1995, late spring. At this point in Warsaw, there appeared these really shockingly sexist commercials for... Mobile Oil. The advertisement showed a couple; the guy was relaxed and calm and with this sense that he was feeling great in the car, but he was sitting in the passenger seat, and next to him, there was a woman, clutching the steering wheel, and her face was that of a mad woman, her mouth open as if she's screaming, and with a look like she's

¹¹ **Umińska, Bożena:** A journalist and feminist. Also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

¹² **Bund:** (General Jewish Workers Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia) was founded in 1897. It sought to preserve Jewish culture and Jewish nationality in the context of socialism through speaking Yiddish and perpetuating Yiddish culture. The Bund enjoyed a large following in Poland, where it set up schools and social services and ran in elections before the outbreak of World War II.

¹³ **PSF** (the Polish Feminist Association): a feminist group at first mostly gathering students interested in feminist theories and issues, which was formally registered in 1989 and existed till 1997.

completely crazy, and the words, “Even she won’t harm your engine.” Or, in other words, you may be calm, because even though this mad woman is driving, this gasoline... will protect you from her, from the mad woman. And we got furious, so we left this meeting, the three of us, the three people who had just met, and we started thinking about what to do. We met for tea at one of these girls’ houses... unfortunately I don’t remember their names any more. We were kind of friends for a while but then we lost touch. But anyway, there were three of us. One had a car, and the second one, meaning me, had a roller. It was a roller for painting my apartment, since I had just moved into a new apartment I had bought with money saved at Oxford, and I was painting kitchen cabinets, I remember, with this small roller. And this roller, fastened to my ski-stick – I remember we used string and tape to connect them – became an instrument of a terrorist, feminist attack, which involved driving around with a bucket full of white paint, since the background of this commercial was white, and painting over the letter “s,” so that what was left was, “Even he won’t harm your engine.” It was... it was a fascinating experience. For three nights, we drove around all night and painted over one hundred fifty of these ads in all of Warsaw and quite a bit outside of Warsaw as well. And it was the time in Poland when advertising wasn’t so developed yet, which means that if there were three or maybe four advertisements on billboards at one time, that was considered a lot. And it was very noticeable. And in fact, people would stop and look at these commercials with open mouths, and in general they would laugh and comment on it, and then the press picked it up. It was published in four newspapers, I think, together with the picture of the advertisement. And then, to our amusement, PSF came forward to say they did it even though neither of us was affiliated with PSF. So we got together and we were really pissed off that there was this organization which was falling apart and didn’t know what it wanted to do, but we never officially claimed it. I mean it was clear in the feminist circles that we did it. And at some point, this company, Mobil, or rather the advertising agency that did the campaign said they were sorry and it wasn’t really nice to women, but that they were planning another ad which would be malicious toward men. That ad was never made, of course, but this event helped me realize how much one person could do with just a bit of imagination. I mean that one could protest in a way... that had an element of risk and imagination. For me it was related to my memories from the end of high school, when I was active in this group Catch 22, which fought against communism using practical jokes. For example, we would dress up as dwarfs and we’d organize a march of dwarfs toward the Palace of Culture, with huge... we had posters of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, all dressed up in red hats. And the police would simply lose their heads. And this is the kind of surrealist joke, all these marches and there were many events like that, which causes the system to go after you but at the same time... there is this surrealist situation when it’s actually unclear why they’re attacking you if you’re a dwarf. Or you run around with a roller on a stick and paint over letters. I mean it’s a kind of struggle against the system, which is indirect and which brings about some element of amazement and amusement, so that people come to your side. And this... this is, I think, a connection between the history of a surrealist fight against the commies and an equally surrealist fight against patriarchy, which I consider to be a grotesque system, to some extent. I don’t... I don’t treat patriarchy totally seriously. I mean I have a feeling patriarchy is this system... kind of dying and more and more aware of its own stupidity and idiocy, and using empty clichés, a bit like late communism. This is the kind of system that’s already decaying and stinking and once in a while it still breathes in its own stench. And you just need to wave a handkerchief a little, so that it starts feeling the stink. And... and it is our... it is, I think, also our

strategy at the Manifs¹⁴ to ridicule rather than express indignation. It is... it works better. So I told you in such detail about this terrorist act of ours, because it was the act which, first of all, connects my opposition past with the later feminist interest through the form of activism, but also because it was... it preceded the Manifs by five years, but it was the first clearly feminist action, which later became a template for me... but it also proved that I wasn't afraid. That I could do something like this, since, by the way... I am the person... for example I have... at least I had then this feeling of shyness, but when I feel I'm right and at the same time I feel that what I do has this theatrical and amusing dimension, a lioness wakes up in me. I mean I feel up to doing something that's this... this... terrible, funny and wonderful. And my current fascination with the second wave of feminism and all these various terrorist attacks, like for example the 1968 attack in Atlanta, Atlantic City, I mean the attack against the Miss America pageant, is part of that. What fascinates me about it is that a small group of women does something quite crazy. Outrageous. Or my favorite event from the second wave of feminism was the occupation of the Ladies Home Journal building in the summer of 1979, the year I was born. I think it's awful to be born when such interesting things are happening, a terrible waste of time. Well, I simply mean the fact that two hundred women would sneak into... I mean dressed up as real women in dresses and stockings would simply... I don't know... would just get into elevators and simply go up to the publishing offices of the most conservative women's journal and carry out its occupation, demanding a feminist take-over of the journal. Well... it is... it is simply completely, incredibly wonderful and grotesque and... and... fantastic and... and... and I believe it would be worthwhile to go around the States to talk to women who did it, so that they could talk about it in detail. It really... really amuses me and it makes me sad when it doesn't amuse others. I mean I don't have... for me, this kind of moment of communication with the feminists is the moment when I feel it catches on. That they get excited. That's it. So what gets me excited in the Polish feminism are the crazy and spontaneous actions.

SW: When in 1995 you were driving around at night...

AG: Yea...

SW: It was 1995 and the feminist circles knew about it. What kind of circles are we talking about? Were there any?

AG: There was the PSF group, which I was beginning to get to know. I remember that at that meeting and at a few others I also attended, there were these people... Teresa Oleszczuk was very important to me then... later on, she fell off the circuit, but she was at that time the central person for the Warsaw feminism. There was Basia Limanowska, who was... whom I admired. She was the person who seemed to me... she had this aura... I haven't seen her for many years, so I don't know what she looks like now and if she still has this aura, but then she had this joint toughness and incredible beauty. Kind of feminine but also sharp. She fascinated me. There was Bożena Umińska, Wanda Nowicka, but there were also many women who aren't part of this group any more; I don't remember names. I think there was one more person. Her last name was Nowicka, because she... I was new then, so these were all new faces for me, but there were

¹⁴ **Manifestations**, which oppose discrimination against women both in Poland and in the world. The first Manif was organized in 2000 by the informal group Women's Association 8 March, and since that time Manifs are carried out every year.

about fifteen to twenty people, a few young reporters, also a few students or MAs, particularly in the English department, where there were many people connected... somehow identifying themselves as feminists. I had this friend Kasia Janic, at the doctoral program in English, who also fell off the circuit later, but was very active at the time. Later on, Kazia Szczuka joined in and... and the whole group of women from gender studies, most likely the first gender studies program in Poland, at the School of Social Sciences, and that is Kazia Szczuka, and Kasia Bratkowska, whom I have known since the Catholic Intelligentsia Club times, she was my friend from CIC (KIK), and now is one of the most radical Polish feminists... There was Agata Araszkiwicz, well... and the girls from Professor Janion's¹⁵ seminar, which is a very academic group but also, I think, more oriented toward activism than their equivalent academic groups in the States or Western Europe. Then, there was another action we did, still before the Manifis, and this time it was Kazia Szczuka and I. And again, there was driving around in a car at night, this time with Kazia's sister, since at that time I didn't yet have a car or a driver's license. And we were gluing on posters everywhere. One said "Kapera is like cholera" ("Kapera nam doskwiera")¹⁶. And the other was "Patriarchy Will Die." But it was less spectacular than the one about Mobile Oil, because it was less noticeable. I had this feeling it was... more like for ourselves, that only we knew where the posters were, they were so small. But it was... well... Kazia Szczuka was a Ph.D. student then and I was already... I already had a Ph.D. I think, I don't quite remember, but anyway, these were late 1990's and it didn't bother us. I mean we were pursuing academic careers and we wanted to be serious, but at the same time, we also wanted to be freedom fighters for women, or as Kazia used to say, "for people of female descent" [laughter].

SW: So it was all mostly going on in NGOs, and later on also at the University, right?

AG: I think for me it was more at the School of Social Sciences. Yes, the School of Social Sciences and the seminars taught by Ania Titkow¹⁷ and Małgosia Fuszara.¹⁸ This seminar was very important to me, since a big part of my book resulted from it. For a term paper, I wrote this piece about Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz¹⁹, who ran a presidential campaign in 1993. And I made some observations while participating in this campaign and this... this... I turned in this work as

¹⁵ **Janion, Maria** (born in 1926): a historian of literature, ideas and imagination, a professor in the Literary Studies Institute at the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), has taught seminars to students for many decades. An author of several books, such as: *The Romantic Fever*; *Toward Evil*; *Life after Death of Konrad Wallenrod*; *Will You Know What You Have Experienced?*; *Women and the Spirit of Otherness*; *The General's Tears*; *Essays about War*. Initiated the series *Transgressions*.

¹⁶ **Kapera, Kazimierz** (born 1942) became the Government Minister for the Family after parliamentary elections of 1997. Kapera is a member of the Christian-National Alliance, a party known for its radically conservative views on social roles of men, women and the family.

¹⁷ **Titkow, Anna**: Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Warsaw. Also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

¹⁸ **Fuszara, Malgorzata**: the Head of the Center for Socio-Legal Studies on the Situation of Women and the Director of the Gender Studies Program at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw. (In May 1995, she lectured at the University of Michigan on Women's Rights in Eastern Europe.)

¹⁹ **Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Hanna** (born 1952) was a deputy chairperson of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and also a chairperson of the Polish National Bank in 1992-2000. In 1995, while running for president, she ran a campaign, which on one hand promoted a traditional model of femininity, but on the other hand tried to create femininity as an asset in the world of politics. These ideas were reflected in the campaign slogan "Let's Take Care of Poland" and in her warm, mother-like image on campaign posters.

my term paper and later on... it was I think my first published piece and it came out in the *New Res Publica*²⁰. And it was so... it got some award, and I had this feeling I had my own style, I mean I had... there was something... some kind of my own feminism, which has... which joins some tendency to ridicule with looking at reality, seeing it topsy-turvy, seeing it from the outside, and being amazed by it. Later on, after my book came out in 2001²¹, Jola Brach-Czaina²² wrote about it that... and later it was put on the cover, that I had this skill of amazement. And I think that it really is what... it is what my feminism is about. Amazement, or this kind of de-familiarization. Showing, showing something everybody can see but in a different way, in a slightly crooked mirror, to be able to see the grotesque dimension of... of this thing. In this case, it was about Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz's campaign, but... and my whole work, feminist thinking and writing, has this slant... to show the strange and the grotesque... and also perhaps the literary dimension of patriarchy. I mean showing that patriarchy uses some narratives, some stories about the world, which are terribly conventionalized, terribly... well, full of clichés, which really don't tell us anything about the world. And now, seeing these clichés, seeing these narratives from a certain distance shows that they are, in fact, just narratives, so it's possible to tell another narrative. For me, a turning point text was this piece by Shana Penn²³ which was published in one of the first issues of *In Full Voice*²⁴ under the title "The State Secret" and which later became a foundation for her book about Solidarity women. Shana Penn, an American feminist, came to Poland and conducted interviews with Solidarity women. This piece showed me a fragment of my youth in a completely different dimension, seen very differently. After I read it, I realized that feminism was in fact somehow useful for Polish history, for the Polish... for the Polish transformation period. That we don't in fact have to tell the universal narrative about women in patriarchy, but that we have tools, that feminism gives us tools, and we have to change them, so that they fit our reality, but, well, that there are some generally accessible, feminist tools, which now need to be adapted to the Polish reality. By the way, Sławka, your book²⁵ is, I think, a first attempt to talk about Polish history from this perspective. I mean it's an attempt to show that it is... that it... that this Polish patriarchy of ours also has its... own cadres... I remember this sentence from your book, which I really loved, so that I quoted it many times afterwards, that this Polish contract for knights... between knights and ladies is about the knight bringing the lady a rose and putting it down at her feet, and this rose is Poland, which these guys constantly place at our feet and we're supposed to not disturb them, you know. And this inscription... and this is also most likely from your book that I know it... and later on, it was

²⁰ *The New Res Publica* – a socio-political journal published by Professor Marcin Krol.

²¹ **Graff, Agnieszka**, *World without Women: Gender in the Polish Public Life*, Warsaw 2001, WAB.

²² **Brach-Czaina, Jolanta**: a university professor, author and co-author of many books in the field of aesthetics, philosophy, art, culture and anthropology. In 1992, published "Gaps of Existence," an essay called "the Bible of feminism" and considered one of the most important works of the last half a century.

²³ **Penn, Shana**: a U.S. scholar and a visiting professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California in 2005. She directed the Jewish heritage Initiative in Poland. She is the author of *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (2005).

²⁴ *In Full Voice* is the first Polish feminist publication after 1989. In 1993-97, five issues were published by the Women's Foundation eFKa in Krakow.

²⁵ **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).

an important inspiration for me... that this inscription in the Gdańsk shipyard²⁶, in this most sublime moment of the Polish transformation, at the Gdańsk shipyard wall, there appears an inscription, “Women, do not disturb us; we’re fighting for Poland.” We, the men, for Poland, for you. And, well... I... I think... I’m using the language... in terms of cultural narratives, and this narrative about men who fight for Poland and women are supposed to not disturb them but to admire their efforts... well, it’s a very specifically Polish narrative. It’s perhaps a bit similar to the Irish... I worked on this a little, so these Irish things are close to me, both their Catholicism and their constant sense of humil... of the humiliated national pride. And these women in black who are supposed to slowly move around and be strong, because it’s not a narrative about weak women who need being taken care of, like in the American or the English narrative; that’s a different story. But, frankly speaking, it’s equally stupid. And equally limiting and equally, well, destructive when a person is trying to be... a person of female descent. And... and to live independently.

SW: You’ve taken up this newest mythologized Polish history with great passion...

AG: Yea...

SW: ... in this piece that was published in *Wyborcza*²⁷ and started the debate. How did it come to publish this piece? What was going on? It was a hot summer, 1999 perhaps...

AG: Yes, it was a hot summer for me. I’m a bit shy, because it requires some sort of overcoming... I mean this whole story, and particularly the way Shana Penn²⁸ told it later in her book, it... it is some sort of a caesura²⁹ in... in the Polish feminism’s visibility. And I... because I later became known, I have... there is some embarrassment in this... I remember it all started with my piece. But well... that’s how it was and it... It’s a bit because it was a fine, finely written text but also because it was a really perfect fit for *Gazeta Wyborcza*’s need at that time. But let me start from the beginning. Well... in “Patriarchy after *Sex Mission*,”³⁰ a piece I wrote in the summer, or late spring 1999, which means probably even before my Ph.D. defense but I recall the sense of being done and that I would defend soon and... this was the piece, which claimed that the Polish transformation took place without women and that it happened that way because the recent... the history of recent years in Poland was told with the use of a gender metaphor. That means it was a narrative about... that communism was a matriarchy, a reversal of roles, it was a world in which women were running the show and men were humiliated, castrated actually, and they were weeding gardens instead of working in politics, because politics was this dirty... this domain of communists, so femini... so communism was the world of reversed roles

²⁶ **The Gdansk Shipyard:** one of the biggest Polish shipyards, a cradle of Solidarity, where the August Agreements were signed in 1980 (that is the agreements between the Polish government and the strike committees). August 1980 became an impulse for systemic changes, which ultimately led to the fall of communism.

²⁷ ***Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral Newspaper)** – a Polish national daily, second in sales figures, published by the media conglomerate Agora, Inc. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is considered to be one of the most influential press organs when it comes to shaping the public opinion.

²⁸ **Penn, Shana:** a U.S. scholar and a visiting professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California in 2005. She directed the Jewish heritage Initiative in Poland. She is the author of *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (2005).

²⁹ Pause or break.

³⁰ ***Sexmisja* (Sex Mission):** a 1984 Polish cult comedy/science fiction film directed by Juliusz Machulski.

and now it was supposed to all go back to normal. Therefore, the roles needed to be moved back into place. And this text uses the discourse analysis method of some debates in the Sejm,³¹ which were then going on about... well... about the equal status legislation, which was rejected a few times... among laughter, among laughter and references to *Sex Mission*, a Polish cult comedy, in which... in which... well, there is this world of reversed gender roles, the underground world, since it's like... a science fiction comedy, in which women created this matriarchal world without men and they rule there... and this rule strongly resembles communist times... and by accident, two men from the futu... from the past fall into this world, and the world is all futuristic, and they generally bring in some order... I mean using diversion tactics typical for Polish opposition fighters, they impregnate... among others... they put in their healthy sperm into this factory for making girls, so at the end, in the last shot of the movie, there appears a healthy little pecker, or the future of the nation in other words, or... or again the norm. And this is the movie, which... I realized at that time exactly through these references to *Sex Mission* in these... these parliamentary debates but *Sex Mission* was also shown then at Ośka³². And... and it was Iza Ko... probably Iza, but not Iza Kowalczyk, but Iza Filipiak³³ who somehow got into this conversation with me about *Sex Mission*... that it was this... something very important in the Polish narrative of recent years, so she also has something to do with this piece I wrote. And it is a narrative about... that getting out of communism is imagined by Polish men as getting out of a woman's womb, as a cutting off of the umbilical cord. At the end of *Sex Mission*, there is a scene when they're getting out of the underground world, in space suits since they're still thinking that the earth is contaminated with radiation, and then they take off these suits, take them off and leave the umbilical cord, which is the breathing pipe in the suit... leave it behind, and they take a deep breath in this normal patriarchal world. And then... well... it turns out that this whole world of women... not only was it not needed, not only was it stupid, not only was it badly organized, but also it was in fact ruled by a guy dressed up as a broad. So there is this element of the Polish grotesque, and finally, they simply get to these women... and in general, just start fooling around with them. And they, the women, realize that sex with a real man, a man like Stuhr³⁴, is... that it's what their life is all about. And then, there is a really charming scene, for me, when they all... they're all in this little house on the surface, and they're eating soft-boiled eggs, and women try to turn off some lid on the egg, because in their technology-dominated, underground world, eggs are not real eggs, but then the guys cut off the tips of these eggs and... I have this feeling like... this egg is just like... like... like this matriarchy, you know and that's... So well, I and... re-interpret the year 1989³⁵ and what happened later... well... as a parting with this matriarchy. And now it's like ok, now we can have our own way. And these

³¹ **Sejm**: The lower house of the bicameral National Assembly (the Senate is the upper house). The Sejm is the more powerful of the two chambers. The Sejm has the constitutional responsibility of initiating and enacting laws as well as overseeing state administration.

³² **Ośka**: the Information Center for Women's Groups – is a non-profit, independent foundation, initiated in 1995, which supports women's organizations and initiatives, promotes women's participation in public and social life, and provides knowledge and information for all people interested in the situation of women and in feminism in Poland and in the world.

³³ **Filipiak, Izabela** (born in 1961) – a feminist writer, essayist, and columnist.

³⁴ **Stuhr, Jerzy** (born in 1947) – a director and film and theater actor, played the main character in Juliusz Machulski's film *Sex Mission*.

³⁵ **1989**: The year of the system's transformation. The Round Table negotiations are followed by the peaceful transfer of power by the communists. It begins with the semi-democratic election to the Sejm (Parliament), which Solidarity wins by a crushing margin. Since that moment, the process of government democratization has been under way.

are... these young businessmen with their little brief-cases, who... for whom their little wives wait with their little dinners, the way it's supposed to happen in the orderly, patriarchal world, and that, in other words, is a bit how it was in the States in the 1950's, most likely, you know, this Polish image of Paradise: this little house, wife, two and a half children, a TV set and a Cadillac. And, well... this is what I'm making fun of in this piece... this... this whole narrative, and... and I think that's why the text was published. I also talked about, following Shana Penn and her piece I mentioned earlier, how Solidarity women have been forgotten. And I think that... well, because of this passage, the text was published. Well... actually, I know this. I mean Michnik³⁶ read this piece and thought to himself, "Shoot, this thing here is good stuff." It was 1999, and that means the twentieth anniversary of Solidarity [sic. Transl.] and *Gazeta Wyborcza* was debating different versions of history and the Round Table³⁷ and Solidarity and here it was, this strange, feminist version, exotic and strange, you know, and that's, of course, how I got in. But, of course, it wasn't a completely free lunch, either. I mean... First of all, the text was quite heavily edited. Everything about Helena Łuczywo³⁸ was cut, based on her wish, and the full version appeared in my book; it is the first chapter of my book, published in 2001, and Helena Łuczywo's stuff is included there. And besides, the next day, a polemical piece came out in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. It was by Joanna Szczęsna, one of the Solidarity women I described, who was strongly disagreeing with my vision of history, disagreeing in a way that was extremely painful for me, because it referred to my cultural foreignness, not the Jewish one, of course, but the American one. I mean... there is a sentence about a stupid American, Shana Penn... I'm not quoting exactly, but something like... while that it's possible to understand that the American Shana Penn didn't quite get what it was about, but for a Pole not to get it...? When I read it, I thought to myself... I started to cry when I was reading this piece, since she hit me in a vulnerable spot, a spot where I don't feel fully Polish, for the following two reasons. First of all, I am Jewish, and this is the whole long Polish narrative, and second of all, because I stayed in the States too long. And... and this was a dilemma, I think, of my feminism... before I understood... before I had got to understand that it was an important piece, which opened a lot of people's eyes

³⁶ **Michnik, Adam:** editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*Electoral Newspaper*) since 1989. Historian, political activist, and political writer. In 1968-1969, he was imprisoned for participating in the student protests of March 1968. Since 1977, a member of the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR), in 1978, he became a lecturer at the Academic Courses Association (TKN). He was interned in 1981-1982 and imprisoned in 1984-1986. He participated in the Round Table negotiations (1989), which contributed to the fall of the Polish People's Republic. He has received numerous awards, including Prix de la Liberte of the French PEN Club (1982), A. Kijowski Award (1985), R.F. Kennedy Human Rights Award (1986), European Journalist Association Award (1995), the Award for Journalism and Democracy from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), IPI Press World Freedom Hero (2000), and the Erasmus Award for 2001.

³⁷ **Round Table:** Talks conducted between representatives of the opposition, mostly people associated with Solidarity, de-legalized after martial law was implemented, and representatives of the governing camp, and mostly The Polish United Workers Party (PZPR), from February 6 to April 5, 1989. The object of negotiations was to establish principles of democratizing the political system and reforming the economy, which would be acceptable for both sides. The signed agreement mandated that reforms of the political and economic system would occur by evolutionary means. The reforms were to be based on political pluralism, freedom of speech, independent judiciary, strong local government, democratic elections for all elected branches of the government, unrestricted development of various forms of property, development of the free market and economic competition, among others. The negotiations' outcomes provided the foundation for principal changes in Poland's political situation, enabled Solidarity's victory in the parliamentary elections, changed the existing Sejm coalition, and led to the first non-communist government in the post-war Poland.

³⁸ **Łuczywo, Helena:** deputy editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in whose creation in 1989 she participated. Until August 2004, she was a vice-chairperson of Agora's board of directors.

to something important, some suspicion hatched in my head that perhaps I had been outside the country for too long, that I was perhaps making something up, that perhaps I didn't understand something, that perhaps I was cut off from Polishness that I had always been longing for while considering myself a patriot. I mean I have a very strong emotional attitude towards Poland, and it may sound exaggerated and funny and stupid, but I believe my feminist activism to be patriotic. I... what I do, well, through it, I want to regain Poland for women, and it's not about America, for example. American feminism interests me only from the Peeping Tom's perspective. But I want to do feminism in Poland, for Poland, with Polish women and also with Jewish women. And... here is this woman from Solidarity, and I'm bowing to her and saying, "It's so sad you've been forgotten, you did something wonderful, why have you withdrawn from politics, come back to us, be with us." And she says to me, "What are you saying, you silly kid, you have no clue." It was terribly painful then. And at some point I started defending myself, a bit under the influence of my mother, who was very, very worried about this situation and who wanted to protect me very much, and I started making desperate phone calls to many women from feminist groups and asking them to write something. And Małgosia Fuszara wrote something, a really nice piece, and Joanna Bator wrote a piece that was a bit unpleasant to me, something that I was as a representative of the American... enlightened feminism, of its *Gazeta Wyborcza* breed, so she also let me have it, but there were as many as about seventeen of these pieces. Even Maria Janion³⁹ spoke up at some point. And since she's the biggest intellectual authority, I really felt validated. Shana Penn also participated at some point in this discussion... or maybe it was later, I don't quite remember... At any rate, there were several of these pieces, and I remember that *Gazeta Wyborcza*, represented by Krzysztof Varga, this young, rather conservative intellectual, was really looking for anti-feminist texts. But it turned out that most people who are interested in gender issues had mostly feminist views. So most good pieces were coming from feminists and it was also the case that they got a lot of very radical pieces and *Gazeta* started to pick and choose among them. And your piece, as far as I can remember, didn't get published then... and it was like a kind of warning perhaps for us... that when feminism enters into the mainstream, it isn't with the voice we've come up with, but these... the mainstream media well... these media will... will get to decide who's published and who's this nice feminist and who is a not-so-nice feminist. And this... at that point, I didn't yet have a feeling I have today that I know when I do have an impact and when I'm being taken advantage of. I still had a feeling that it was all just happening outside of my control, and that it was fantastic but also terrifying. And well... I think that this is when my career started as that of a feminist that can be accepted by the mainstream. And at times I feel very uncomfortable with this role. And I try to disrupt this role somehow. For example, when about two years ago, my picture was published in this kind of a catalogue of the most important Polish women, or something like successful Polish women, and feminists were represented by me and by Kazia Szczuka, I had a nausea attack. I mean... that this rag-like... well maybe I'm exaggerating a bit, since *Warsaw Life* is simply a local paper, but it defiles my face, puts me next to some models, some actresses, some conservative women and some... What is that supposed to be? I don't want it... I don't want to be catalogued by... by these media. But this is how it happens. They simply

³⁹ **Janion, Maria** (born in 1926): a historian of literature, ideas and imagination, a professor in the Literary Studies Institute at the Polish Academy of Sciences, has taught seminars to students for many decades. An author of several books, such as: *The Romantic Fever*; *Toward Evil*; *Life after Death of Konrad Wallenrod*; *Will You Know What You Have Experienced?*; *Women and the Spirit of Otherness*; *The General's Tears*; *Essays about War*. Initiated the series *Transgressions*.

took my picture from somewhere on the Internet... and put me in there and they said something like... that I'm a feminist but still very pretty. And simply...I was...it was awful...it was like... ouch. A very un-cool experience. But this debate in 1999... it was certainly very good and I remember that Shana Penn told me that as long as she could remember, a debate like that never happened in the States, in the mainstream press, and there was nothing like this in the *New York Times*. At that point, *Gazeta*... it was kind of a dead season, that's true, but still *Gazeta* treated the women's question very seriously. And... and it did it only once. I know that Adam Michnik, the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta*, when other discussions about women's issues were being suggested to him, would respond, "What for? We've already done that, it was done before." So it's this kind of a ...since 1999, we've been slowly learning what the status of women's question is in Poland. It's supposed to be covered as an amusing story, as a story related to other stories in an interesting way, but it's never autonomous, it's rather for the dead season, and when a newspaper checks it off once, it doesn't need to cover it again.

SW: Tell us also, at what point of your feminism are you now?

AG: I am in this place where I'm gradually withdrawing. I mean I'm focused on my academic life. I'm writing a dissertation about American feminism and I feel it's important to finish... I mean to become another feminist she-professor who will build some institutional foundations of feminism in Poland, because I see it more and more how strong the old-boy network is in the Polish academic life. And these are men who really treat feminism with disdain. So I've started treating my academic side more seriously, but at the same time, I haven't mentioned the most important thing and I should perhaps talk about it in a few sentences. My identification with feminism occurs mainly through Manifs, in other words through women's marches which started in 2000 and since then happen once and sometimes twice a year, since there is one also in December in Warsaw and now also in other cities. And I was the initiator, together with three or four other girls, of this first march in 2000. And every year, they are becoming bigger and bigger and more colorful, going back in their convention to these surrealist opposition motifs of the 1980's. And for the last two years, I haven't been the organizer; I am a participant and a helper, a bit in the role of some kind of a founding mother, who is somewhat respected by the younger girls, and a bit of a star, since my book was nominated for the Nike Award and became a bestseller, and now, about a week ago, I found out there will be another printing, so together there are about fifteen thousand copies circulating around. So I am this kind of a... feminist mom, but I've also come to realize that I have a right to say "no." I mean that I don't have to go when I'm invited to the other side of Poland because a few people there want to listen to what I have to say, that I don't have to paint banners, that younger girls can do it, that I have my own private life, and that it's a part of my feminism to take care of this life seriously. Since we're talking frankly, let me move on to this personal aspect. I really want to have a baby now and... and it turned out I have some fertility problems, and for a few years, I haven't been able to get pregnant. So I've decided to take advantage of some technological benefits but in a very conscious way, I mean, by learning this... this... this bodily... positive side of reproduction. I mean not only the right to abortion, which I have been actively fighting for in Poland, but also the right to have a baby. And it is a very difficult experience for me, an experience I'm trying to describe in writing, and I have to say nothing has ever been so hard to write about. I'm generally a fast writer and at this point, I have perhaps written about three pages, and these were the hardest three pages to write. It's about this ambivalence related to how hard it is to want to have

a baby and not be able to have it in a culture, which is so strongly oriented toward... toward... toward motherhood, and in which women are constantly being evaluated on whether they have children. It is hard to make sure that one really wants to have a baby... I should perhaps speak in the first person... that I want to have a baby, my partner and I and it's not because various neighbors, aunts, grandmothers and so on are glaring at me because I'm thirty six and no child. And that this is about entangling my own longing, my body and my intimate experience from this terrible, oppressive culture. And it's terribly hard... and unfortunately it also requires withdrawing from political life. I mean I can't at this point afford showing my face on TV to speak about abortion. It's very hard for me now... of course, I'm pro-choice and I can differentiate between somebody with an unwanted pregnancy who wants to abort and the fact that I want to have a baby, but at the same time... well, I didn't agree, for example, to wear the tee-shirt with the words, "I had an abortion" for the media. First of all, I didn't even though I could have perhaps had it at some point if I had had an unwanted pregnancy, and second of all, I am now very strongly focused on getting pregnant and I don't want any bad luck. I don't want to... I mean I want to be able to say "no." And it's also related to some feeling of guilt... to this kind of hard look at my own body, own body and realizing that my feminism has always been kind of from the head... kind of brilliant, you know, with references to Lacan here and there, to literature, to narratives and so forth, and here I have to face the challenge of my own guts, of my ovaries, and of being a woman in a bodily sense. And it is very hard and very interesting, and I think it's some new stage in my life.

Agnieszka Graff

Born	February 3, 1970
1981-1983	lived in the United States, in Amherst
1986	first great love
1988-1993	university studies in the United States and England
1993-1995	graduate school, literature, Oxford University
1995-2000	faculty member, Department of English, Warsaw University
1997	translated Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"
Since 2000	faculty member, American Studies Center, Warsaw University
2001	published <i>The World without Women</i>

The recording session took place in Wiśniowa with Sławomira Walczewska and Beata Kozak