

As a Woman i Have no Country: Dislocations of National and Gender Identities Across and Beyond European Borders

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In the recently published *Reader in European Women's Studies: Thinking Differently* (2003), Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti explicitly link two socio-cultural constructs: femininity and citizenship. This conceptual convergence opens up the subject of political representation and, more importantly, it dismantles the homogenizing aspect of nation as a practical container of fragmented, collectively diffused and infused gender identities. Many people, locals and emigrants alike, believe, without question, that they belong to a particular and identifiable national group. There is certainly a degree of inevitability in this 'identification', because it provides a deeply anchored need for protection. But the cost of such homogenization is often particularly high for women (Griffin and Braidotti 2003: 230). Homes and origins are hardly ever homogenous, and even if they are, who decides on their authenticity? Virginia Woolf's dictum 'As a woman I have no country' suggests both the invisibility of women within (nationalist) politics and the appropriation of women for such politics. Another legendary statement theoretically embracing the logocentric objectification of women (and the so-called 'female subject') comes from Jacques Lacan:

There is no wbut excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words, and it has to be said that if there is one thing about which women themselves are complaining at the

moment, it's well and truly that – it's just that they don't know what they are saying, which is all the difference between them and me (1975)¹.

In feminist discourses Lacan's announcement has been interpreted as an example of phallogocentric arrogance, bordering on theoretical provocation. What concept does it refer to, or even attempt to speak about? A 'woman' as an object of exchange (Irigaray 1975), which cannot be represented, and which remains linguistically absent? Referring to Lacan, Julia Kristeva writes in 'Women's Time' (1981), "indeed, she does *not* exist with a capital 'W', possessor of some mythical unity" (1997: 872). Caught in the system that envelops the phallus with the symbols of power, 'she' (the female pronoun, the one designated She) cannot be spoken about, except through metaphors of negation, that is, through a political deferral of meaning in which all that matters is an endless imitation of poses and gestures. Simultaneously, following Judith Butler's argument, it is impossible to separate the 'existing' women "from the political and cultural intersections in which they are invariably produced and maintained" (1990: 3). Thus the subject of discussion today is certainly not a/the Woman as Man's 'specular other' (Irigaray 1985), but rather a question as to whether 'woman' as a complex political subject has taken her distance from the institution of identity: femininity, nationality, ethnicity, and logocentric heritage of culture seem to be the key issues here.

In recent years feminist theories have been criticized for adopting overly simplistic 'globalizing' approaches to heterogeneous social phenomena. Following Kathy Davis (2002), the assumption that patriarchy operates in similar ways across national borders neglects historical and material differences in women's situations which give rise to different concerns and require different political struggles. The 'global' move has allowed some US (and European) feminists to avoid confronting painful race/ethnic and class differences among women in their own cultures, while obscuring the dominance of middle-class women around the globe (Kaplan 1996). The relative ease and sometimes a preference for middle-class feminists to forge alliances with other similar women across borders, rather than with their less affluent 'sisters' at home, confirm that split (Ezekiel and Verloo 2002). Extending the issues that second-wave feminists opened for socio-political discourse, contemporary cross-European debates emphasize the necessity to integrate autonomous representations of socio-economic and political positions. The so-called

¹ Jacques Lacan's seminar *Encore: 'On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge'* quoted in *Feminine Psychology: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, 144.

third wave (postfeminist) agenda focuses on the factual implications of differences, taking into account variables such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality or age. The need to step down from the theoretical podium of 'gender mainstreaming' has become most explicit in the acknowledgement that it is neither men nor women but a particularly privileged class of people, mostly men, who reach high-level positions in politics, media, business, or academe². This segment of the population is strikingly small compared to the numbers of wo/men who work in low-paying, dead-end or part-time jobs with a lack of benefits, and the numbers of others (mostly women) who stay home performing for no pay what is frequently not even acknowledged as work. And while the liberation of some women has become possible, it is often due to the illegal importation of a precious new raw material – care and love for sale – from 'less developed' countries (Ehrenreich 2003).

This paper expands on some of these reflections by focusing on the experience of numerous women (especially mothers) in Eastern/Central Europe as well as on the immigrant paths some of them have chosen. I focus on these spaces because identities seem to be much more prominent in direct contact with other nationalities, that is, in cultural difference that needs to be somehow articulated, in situations where immediate comparison is unavoidable, and where relational definitions are necessary. In her book, *Cinderella Goes to Market*, Barbara Einhorn analyses why Eastern/Central European women do not value political action and have a historically embedded antipathy to feminism (1993: 182-215). She attributes this antipathy to previous experiences with meaningless socialist slogans and tokenisms on the one hand, and the association of women with private, apolitical domains, on the other. With an exception of recently emerging Women's Studies Centers, one could clearly speak of a resistance to feminism in an Eastern European

2 By mainstreaming I refer to the policy adopted by the European Union (EU) 'to promote equality between men and women in all activities and policies at all levels' (COM (96) 67 final). This has led to new legislation in member states on equal pay, equal treatment, parental leave and maternity rights, sexual harassment at work and protection of part-time and fixed-term and contracted work. However, as numerous feminists have recently observed the EU mainstreaming strategy "has been selective in its use of feminist theory" and "focused on organization structure (including language) as a major barrier to change people's attitudes and behaviour. While it recognizes the concept of gendered processes on structural, interpersonal and symbolic levels, it does not locate these in an analysis of patriarchy". The latter can, among others, "appear to be a diluted version of positive action strategies and may appear irrelevant to women's lives. Consequently, feminist scholars and practitioners have been critical of a mainstreaming strategy and have been slow to make a contribution to the policy debate" (Booth and Bennett, 2002: 431-441).

academic context. This antipathy confirms the theoretical alienation of women and relates to Luce Irigaray's "mimetic appropriation" of the hegemonic discourse, which is "practiced without any feminine ideality or model" (2000: 110). It demonstrates that the nationally re-inscribed woman's identity is entrapped in masculine sameness, while the common experience evoked by the 'we', either patriotic (at home) or nostalgic (in case of emigration), prevents women from seeing how certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination. It is by looking at these relations that origin and identity become less obvious, much less irrevocable points of historical reference. Thirty years ago, Irigaray wrote that

serious scientific practices are still the privilege of men, as is the management of the political in general and of the most private aspects of our lives as women [especially the question of abortion and contraception]. Their discourses, their values, their dreams and their desires have the force of the law, everywhere and in all things. Everywhere and in all things they define, they define women's function and social role, and the sexual identity they are, or are not, to have (2000: 35).

My point is that little has changed since such arguments were formulated, except that feminism stereotypically associated with the US 'sisterhood' is out of fashion nowadays. Eastern European responses to feminism certainly do not fit neatly into the US paradigm of 'sisters on the periphery', while "the borders defining the roles of the individual, the family and the state are not the same in post-Communist East and Central Europe as they are in the continuously capitalist western democracies (Frbiřn 2002: 271). In this context, I suggest we consider the changing status of Eastern European 'women' from the tough working mother (of the nation) to a feminine housewife eagerly taking care of the patriarchal household and placing the nation as well as economic power onto strong masculine shoulders. But perhaps she never really was truly tough, perhaps she always sought the security of home? The liberal ideology and social emancipation that socialism brought to women certainly had their faults. Most of the rights working mothers enjoyed in such countries as Poland, Hungary or ex-Yugoslavia, had no feminist foundations and therefore no consciousness raising function. At the mainstream political level, in the governmental body of the former communist countries, women were as invisible as in the Western world. If under the mantle of communist homogenization women have (unknowingly) experienced their political subjection, today gender vulnerability has openly entered every socio-economic aspect of life. Thus, to combat the diminishing social care and gender injustice, the same women who have now encountered a particularly strong and resilient neo-liberal capitalist legislation, have elected political forms that do not anticipate governmental participation (Jalusic: 2002).

Although this civic route to achieving results under pressure of corrupt systems being currently replaced by a capitalist and global market-oriented economy has certainly some potential, it also guarantees enormous hardship and has already resulted in general political amnesia on the part of younger generations. In a way, what is taking place could be called the politics of gender mainstreaming without a foundation in feminist knowledge. As Katalin Férbiń has observed, "the lack of a fitting theoretical framework to incorporate and explain the recent changes has been keenly felt in East European women's circles, because accepting the existing feminist literature as accurate and appropriate has been akin to the discomfort of wearing other people's too tight or overly loose clothes" (2002: 271). However, the recently formulated opinions that women in Central and/or Eastern Europe are not sensitive to gender issues are erroneous. Hindered by the lack of feminist tradition, they are rather differently sensitive, and need to be granted their right to difference. This difference, according to Férbiń, implies not only dissociation from socialist emancipation, or from a stereotyped monolithic anti-male approach, but also from the plain thread of westernization that operates on a higher level of economic development (2002: 279).

Underscored by financial and cultural insecurity, post/communist encounters between East-European migrants and Western economies, are similarly anchored in identity difference. In this context, it is useful to consider the various socio-political channels which construct national identities. In the early nineties, as a Polish (labeled: Eastern European, read: economically underdeveloped, politically suspicious) 'woman', I found myself among many women emigrants caught in the intersectional space of patriarchies, which, practically speaking with few exceptions embraced motherhood, housekeeping, and/or a low-paid working place. I soon realized that I represented a vast (although abstract and quite masculine) cultural body of Eastern Europe, and bore an imprint of a huge territory without wanting it, or even knowing what I represented, simply because of my passport, language, and accent. This labeling, entrenched in the problematic construct of 'origin' that people are often expected to represent, constitutes the 'center' of emigrant identity. It is yet useful to remember that this 'center' is not only a label, but also a point of reference employed by many migrants themselves for the security deriving from the projections of transparency, precision, and clarity of origin, in fact from involuntary 'resacralization' of "the subject that is irretrievably past" (Gallop 1985: 148). For women migrants these encounters are about gender and the inadequacy of language that persistently silences their 'difference'. To articulate these gendered spaces is thus to speak about the many unrealized reasons why women make their stra-

tegitic choices between becoming a mother/house-wife, a nanny, a waitress, a 'cleaning lady', or other (less legal) ways of selling the body. There are of course other options but these, blatantly employing various biological attributes of 'femaleness', commonly prevail.

Moving in the process of creating space beyond the traditional identities, and positing disintegration of 'home', and 'country' as well as of 'body' has become central to my own cross-cultural encounters. I remember my silent astonishment in the first years of living in Austria, when I heard women stating without hesitation that they were housewives when they were asked about their occupation. Should I have told them that this is an unpaid job, unnecessary sacrifice, cultural slavery? What could I say to my female friends back in Poland who, in those communist times, were dreaming of this type of privilege? While speaking from a migrant space, it is difficult to "speak for very long, with any exactness, about one experience, one identity," without acknowledging the other side, or many other sides (Hall 1996: 212). In this sense, trans/national as well as any other identity encounters are about unlearning the privilege of having one perspective, one reference, one scale of comparison, one language. Hence, the question of what it takes to represent, belong to, or be part of the/a nation is also undisputedly a question about gender and its linguistic invisibility. And if one is constructed in a particular language and culture, "what kinds of violence does it do to one's subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first" (Spivak and Gunew 1993: 201)? Entangled in metaphors of space, of geographical and socio-political, but also gender territories, I watch my 5-year old son speaking several 'unfinished' languages, and responding with ease to the inquiries about his origin with something like 'I come from my mother'. Have I not told him that we were Polish, or that he was born in Canada, or that we had Swiss passports? I have, but what my child needs is clarity, a monolithic ideal I myself was fed in childhood. *Kim ty jesteś? – Polak mały. – Jaki znaktwój? – Orzeł biały*³. Let me translate it: *Who are you? – I am a little Pole (read: a Polish boy). – What is your sign (read: identity)? – White eagle* (culturally constructed as a masculine symbol of power/victory). How did I (girls) identify with these particular values? Did these values refer to and acknowledge the specificity of my body, especially since for years I continued to enact one role after another in a great spectacle of womanhood? I still do it, but with an increasing awareness of what it

3 This is a reference to a popularized poem "Katechizm polskiego dziecka" by Władysław Bełza (1847-1913).

implies; of how it refers to or even constitutes one's body. In today's much more uneven and heterogeneous society, I am a parody of the/a man, as I was always already a parody of a boy, since the/a girl was never spoken about, never referred to except as the/a *Polak maly* (the Polish boy).

Crossing national boundaries and territorial borders certainly destabilizes such normative modes of delineating national belonging, however, to negotiate ambiguity and interchangeability of identity, one has to abandon both the restrictions and the privileges. In this context, Butler's concept of identity seems to be appropriate, albeit not easy to put into practice: identity as provisionally cross-cultural and heterogeneous forms of intentional (rather than unintentional) transgressions. These transgressions are indicators of a strategic play with cultural significations, of "knowing when to let it go, at living its contingency, and subjecting it to a political challenge" (1995: 131). They need to be acknowledged in various terms such as ethnicity, social divisions, or family relations and gender which clearly refer to cultural constructions rather than biological conditions. For whenever I am asked about my 'Polishness' (where does it stop, or is there a center to it?), I also need to redefine the borders of my female anatomy. I got used to the 'housewives' in Austria, but only because I lacked gender knowledge (or consciousness), I had no appropriate concepts, no vocabulary to encompass the issue of gender and express my personal frustration with invisibility. Abroad, one meets different types of people who speak one's language, which creates the very reason for an acquaintance until, under the pressure of various intercultural influences, this reason becomes (and has always been) nothing but a nostalgic gesture. Nostalgia, particularly in Northern America, is inadvertently construed as a money-making business operating on and exploiting specificities of national reputation and national inferiority or superiority complexes. Polish immigrants, for example, are rarely proud of their national identity, which, paradoxically, triggers its over/representation: the Polish Clubs (for which many are willing to pay high membership fees), Polish groceries, video stores, and after-church gatherings have a strong community reinforcing function, but often retain nationalist and ostracizing patterns.

In these nostalgic manifestations, experiences specifically related to women's dilemmas are often missing, well-camouflaged or simply underrepresented. Silent or safeguarding male-dominated discourse, women become just as invisible in their new cultural identifications as they have always been in their 'home' countries. Perpetuated by women themselves as carriers of patriarchal ideology, national identities imply a range of other unspoken representations, (such as ethnicity, religion, and cultural heritage) that continuously influence their individual choices.

Often, the preference to 'stay at home and have babies' is not a preference but simply a lack of other choices, a type of imaginary escape from the instabilities of the 'outside' or simply a substitution for some other responsibilities that have become unavailable. Procreation, reproduction of the origin, and the bliss of the new beginning border dangerously on women's exploitation: both those women who accept and who reject the culturally imposed belief in 'natural' motherhood, often dooming the 'mother' to some 'instinct-driven' sacrifices and duties. The problem with this type of 'nature' is the underlying socio-cultural construction of care-giving as every 'healthy' woman's desire – 'natural', and therefore 'naturally' limiting her participation in the economy and the politics of the nation. This deeply rooted conceptualization has, on the one hand, sentenced many mothers to poverty and/or financial dependence on the provider, and on the other hand to constant emotional responsibility for 'home'. The primacy of women care-givers has led to the phenomenon that Diana Pearce characterized as 'the feminization of poverty' (1978: 28). It is therefore women, trapped in the linguistically reinforced gap between genders, who often cannot resolve their cultural belonging unless they recognize the paradoxical wavering of 'fixed' identities that keeps them paradigmatically defective in any of the cultures in question.

To date, most of the feminist fights for women's financial independence, or political authority ended up as an appropriation rather than a deconstruction of sameness⁴. Many women, as much in the East as in the West of Europe, have become business-men, while assuming that the more manlike their professional behavior, the more successful they will be. This type of claim, partly due to the exaggerated focus on women who have 'made it', is misleading, no matter whether we assume that their career is tokenism or a success. In fact, the more successful they are, the deeper they submerge into the phallogocentric system of thinking, denying, or just simply ignoring the so far unresolved dilemma of 'sexual difference'. One could ask: so what went wrong with female emancipation? What went wrong, or what has not been resolved, is precisely the formulation of difference, the negativity which in itself implies a repetition of logocentric reductions of 'woman' to a silent

4 To date, there is little discussion in the West (with the exception of the Scandinavian countries) on the importance of child-care as a public, social and/or communal (rather than private and personal) concern. And the privileges women enjoyed in former communist countries are deteriorating under the pressures of capitalist market. After having established some more liberal working spaces have again become interested in the private sphere of life, and disinterested in taking active part in serious decision-making processes.

and subordinate object: her reduction to a play with 'mimesis' (Irigaray 2000: 124). Miming, which for Irigaray suggests breaking the hostile system from within, implies maintaining a very difficult position of internalized oppositions, of being in-between, sentenced to a permanent compromise. This type of mimesis is difficult to achieve since it borders on a mimicry that fakes power, on 'abortion' that manifests liberty when there is dispossession, and denies sexual difference in order to deny gender imbalance. In this context, the feminist appropriation of sexual difference, whether written in opposition to phallogocentrism or as its critical elaboration, appears to have viewed the feminine "as the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion" (Butler 1990: 28). Let me return to the 'mother' as a type of gender role, and more precisely, to the metaphor of mother mistakenly assumed to represent some existing mothers, the mother as a source of origin. Where is 'she' (the origin marked with the female signature)? Does she have other identities, other territories, or is her fe/male voice a silent hyphen contained by her body? What is her relation to the symbolic structure of the tongue that names these territories and to the symbolic structure which "delineates the cultural horizon of the father tongue [langue] (wrongly termed the mother tongue)" in languages like English, French or German? And that, as Irigaray has observed, "is nevertalked about. A hole in the texture of language corresponds to the forgetting of the scar of the navel" (2000: 41). Suspended between the ambiguous past and uncertain future, the 'mother' mediates culturally discrepant phallogocentric concepts, connects and disconnects with culture (and if 'she' is Polish, at least one detail is clear: her first language is 'język ojczysty', a 'tongue of the father'). In this language 'she' learns to fake her mother tongue, to fake home, to fake mother. Jane Gallop wrote about it in a psychoanalytical context:

the discovery that the mother does not have the phallus means that the subject can never return to the womb. Somehow the fact that the mother is not phallic means that the mother as mother is lost forever, that the mother as womb, homeland, source, and grounding for the subject is irretrievably past. The subject is hence in a foreign land, alienated (1985: 148).

To avoid this alienation and to deal with the various types of nostalgic identity-claims that are proliferating across Europe today, we need to develop a both post-nationalist and gender-sensitive sense of identity. This alternative requires enormous shifts in socio-cultural, political and ethical thinking, and both the political timidity and the resistances against the feminist political project can be clearly felt today

(Griffin and Braidotti 2003). At this stage, a key implication of such an alternative is that 'fixed' identities (nationality, ethnicity, gender) are established to support the hegemonic discourse, and that it is possible to un-fix them into "an open coalition", into a constant renegotiation affirming that identities can be "alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand" (Butler 1996: 16). The role of cross-European feminism that employs constructions of gender as tools for dis-identifying with dominant norms of identity is thus of crucial importance here, as it indicates a step towards resolving 'sexual difference' while attempting to re-define roles both between and within genders and nationalities.

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„Jako kobieta nie mam ojczyzny”. Dyslokacje narodowych oraz kobiecych tożsamości w Europie i poza jej granicami

Autorka artykułu porusza tematykę braku politycznej reprezentacji kobiet. Zestawia socjologiczno-kulturowe pojęcie płci żeńskiej (oraz związaną z nią tzw. kobiecość zachowań) z obywatelstwem i tożsamością narodową. Dyskusja tego zestawienia ujawnia homogeniczny charakter narodu (nacji) i marginalne znaczenie, jakie przypisuje się w nim płci. Pokazuje również, że specyfika reprezentacji kobiet w społeczeństwie oraz wpływająca z niej tzw. naturalne zachowania płci żeńskiej powiązane są ściśle z symboliką przypisywaną biologicznemu wymiarowi różnicy między płciami.

Autorka postuluje konieczność formułowania dyslokacji tożsamościowych oraz podkreśla rolę, jaką feminizm europejski odgrywa w zakreślaniu problemu kobiecej nieobecności w polityczno-ekonomicznym wymiarze narodowościowym.