

INTRODUCTION

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The present volume is a sequel to *A Queer Mixture / Odmiany odmieńca* (2002), which documented the first two queer studies conferences in Poland in 2000 and 2001. Three subsequent annual conferences took place in Warsaw (2002), Bielsko-Biała (2003) and Wrocław (2004), every one of them bringing together close to a hundred scholars and queer activists from Europe and North America. We are pleased to see these events become something of an institutionalized presence in a predominantly conservative Polish cultural and academic landscape, one in which LGBTQ undertakings are always exposed to political, economic and legal threats. For it is impossible to ignore that each of our last three conferences coincided with a crisis around queer people's rights.

In December 2002, in Warsaw, we devoted one panel to a discussion of a series of homophobic articles and antihomophobic responses published by the biggest Polish daily, the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* edited by Adam Michnik. In May 2003 we met in Bielsko-Biała on the night of Poland's EU accession referendum; we had cast our votes before coming to the conference and were all glued to TV screens that night at the hotel, waiting for the preliminary results to come in. The vote passed by a substantial majority.

Earlier that year, the artist Karolina Breguła collaborated with an organization called Campaign Against Homophobia in photographing 15 lesbian couples and 15 gay male couples. Each couple is shown standing in a city street, holding hands. A red stamp in the corner reads: "Let them see us." These 30 photographs were exhibited in galleries across Poland. Two images: one of a lesbian couple and one of a gay male couple, were selected for display on billboards in major cities. In many locations, homophobes managed to prevent the posters from being mounted by decrying them as "visual aggression," and virtually everywhere the posters were torn down or smudged with paint in a matter of days. But there was a heated media debate about whether these images should be allowed to be displayed, and some of the photographed subjects were interviewed about the personal consequences of their courageous exposure. In

effect, even though the campaign was cut short, its ripple effect gave a new level of visibility to the Polish lesbian and gay male community.

The May 2004 conference was in Wrocław, only days after Poland joined the European Union. A week after the accession Cracow had its first gay parade ever. It was interrupted by the All-Polish Youth (MW: Młodzież Wszechpolska), a nationalist militia of the League of Polish Families (LPR: Liga Polskich Rodzin), an extreme right-wing party with deputies in the Polish and the European parliaments. In the 1930s, the anti-Semitic All-Polish Youth was outlawed. Today it has been resurrected, in part to target queers, and has even brought eleven members into the Polish parliament under LPR auspices in the 2005 election. At the time of the violent outbreak in Cracow, a conference on homosexuality at the sociology department of Poland's oldest university, the Jagiellonian, was relegated from the main campus to a distant location on the outskirts of Cracow. That same month, May 2004, the fifth annual Warsaw Equality Parade, which has always had a primarily gay presence, was to take place. We were at the Wrocław conference when we heard that the parade had been banned by the politically ambitious right-wing mayor of Warsaw, recently elected president of Poland. During the same conference, a late-night discussion on queer strategizing taking place in a local bar was disrupted by two homophobic thugs who identified themselves as members of NOP, a right-wing political organization. This unfortunate, if minor, incident seemed merely symptomatic of the deteriorating conditions for a rational discussion on LGBTQ rights in the country, but it has confronted us directly with the harsh reality outside the ivory tower of academia, and sometimes within. Like many other organizations and individuals, we sent the Warsaw mayor a letter of protest, which had no effect. This parade was banned three times because the regional governor twice reversed the mayor's homophobic decision. In the end, a political rally took place in front of the mayor's office on the scheduled day.

Tomek Kitliński and Paweł Leszkowicz have commented on the violent assaults on the Cracow gay march in May 2004 and the subsequent ban of the Warsaw Equality Parade that same month by calling homophobia in Poland "one symptom of a larger social crisis of failed justice" (19). Since 1989, when a new democratic regime changed the context for gay activism, a double logic of increased openness toward and a backlash against queers has been in place. Our series of conferences has been paralleled by an increased gay activism and visibility, as well as by a moral panic around homosexuality, sexual abuse, paedophilia, and HIV. These phenomena are frequently superimposed in public discourse, and occasionally serve as a smokescreen obscuring even more shameful topics, like anti-Semitism. Thus, a Catholic archbishop was forced into retirement for his homosexuality rather than for his actual transgression of molesting clerics who answered to him. Another distinguished clergyman,

whose anti-Semitic statements and flamboyant lifestyle were known but drew only mild criticism, lost his parish when he was accused of seducing an altar boy. A famous choir conductor, charged with sexually molesting boy singers, had his seropositive status exposed by the mainstream liberal daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which acted illegally but, allegedly, in the public's interest. And a theatre director writing regularly for the same daily, in which he courageously came out as a gay man, was soon after attacked by his own paper for volunteering to donate blood. He had been entrapped by his colleagues from the newspaper who first invited him to participate in a blood drive and then turned against him in editorials in which they explained that a gay man's blood is a public health risk. As we were writing the present introduction, two things have happened simultaneously: another collection of essays, *Homofobia po polsku*, the first-ever book on homophobia in Poland, published in October 2004, sold out within just a few weeks, and the "Equality March" in Poznań was attacked and disrupted by the All-Polish Youth militia on November 20, 2004. In the spring of 2005, as a parallel Polish volume was going to press, the Warsaw parade was banned for the second year running. Activists took to the streets anyway, joined by many supporters, some prominent Polish and German politicians among them.

There is more than one way to tell the story of this volume, just as our activist and intellectual strategies are diverse, and as we are learning more than one thing from one another. But perhaps one general point can be made, that the context in which we have to function makes our work (and the present book in particular) politically incorrect in our own country. Ironically, our work is often dismissed as tainted with "political correctness." Some of us have never intended to be politically correct or politically incorrect, to cast ourselves in the terms of this particular binary, but at the moment it feels like the matter is out of our hands.

The concept of "political correctness," which constitutes one of the barriers for—or parameters of—queer desire, has tremendous currency in Poland's intellectual and political debate. Given the recent conservative backlash in this country, Kinga Dunin, one of Poland's most outspoken feminists, wrote in a December 2003 editorial: "I choose what ill-meaning people would surely call political correctness. . . . I wish for political correctness" (46). Rather than knowingly choose the misnomer "political correctness" we may want to examine it critically. During the two decades since it was coined, the term has been used to deter women, non-whites, queer people, and others from reaching for privileges traditionally reserved for white heterosexual men. The intellectual work of those "others," perceived as usurpers of public space, has routinely been devalued as "politically correct."

The cultural conservatives who coined the American term “political correctness” brought to life a phantom power that supposedly stands behind the usurpers. “Political correctness” is a smokescreen obscuring the fact that the cultural conservatives themselves constitute the dominant majority and dictate the terms on which queers enter the public sphere. In Poland, those who use the term insist that they are being gagged by a powerful pressure group. For instance, in an article titled “The Gay Men’s Bishop” published in the weekly *Polityka* Adam Szostkiewicz used the consecration of the Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson in New Hampshire as a pretext to lash out against “the practitioners” of political correctness, “a false doctrine that silences “the voices of Christians who want to speak about poverty and moderation” (57). Located somewhere in what Szostkiewicz calls the “American-European West” there is a phantom power that has turned Poland’s moral order upside down. “The issue of homosexuals’ rights has become. . . a litmus test of the degree of desirable consciousness change. According to the adherents of [political correctness], whoever is in favor of full legal equality understands what the modern liberal society is all about. Whoever opposes such equality deviates from the pluralistic norm. Whoever is uncertain is an intellectual sloth who hasn’t done his homework” (57).

The common rhetorical strategy of invoking a phantom enables Szostkiewicz and other cultural conservatives to deflect attention from the fact that it is both “politically correct” and politically advantageous in Poland today to deny queer people the right of public assembly and free speech, to erase queer histories and to deny the existence of queer cultures. No phantom stopped the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* from giving prominence to pundits defending homophobia as reasonable. No phantom managed to dissuade the Chancellor of the Jagiellonian University from removing an LGBTQ studies conference out of sight, to a campus on the outskirts of Cracow. No phantom prevented the All-Polish Youth from pelting LGBTQ rights demonstrators with stones in the streets of Cracow, and then in Poznań. No phantom stopped the Mayor of Warsaw from banning the 2004 and the 2005 Equality Parades.

This neo-conservative rhetoric—dressed in very “progressive” terms—has also found its way into the Polish academic environment. Polish academia did not have the time to critically investigate the stakes of “political (in)correctness” when a symptomatic conference, ominously entitled “Mouth Wide Shut,” was announced, boldly declaring political correctness to be “democracy’s policeman” in a call for papers that offered foregone conclusions rather than an invitation to critical analyses and open-minded debates: “The many tongues of multicultural discourse speak all the more loudly since the potential opponents, having been successfully bound and gagged, dare not express any contradictory opinion.” Ironically enough, the “Call for Papers”—itself totally unrealistic

about the political balance of power in Poland and elsewhere—ends with the invocation to “take up the challenge before the academe itself is declared a reservation [asylum] for the realistically challenged.” The sarcasm directed at the “politically correct” revision of linguistic conventions itself defers to a fantasmatic Realpolitik. This deferral is motivated by the hope—which we think is false—that academics can make themselves publicly relevant by adopting widespread stereotypes.

The eminent Polish law historian Jan Baszkiewicz was one of the few to see through the phantom of “political correctness”—albeit in a context unrelated to non-normative sexuality. During a recent ceremony at which he received an honorary doctorate from Wrocław University, Baszkiewicz told an anecdote set in the 1960s in which he described as a bold act of “political *incorrectness*” a Chancellor’s defiance of the socialist party’s orders to suppress a symbol of the university’s German past. He thus implied that being “politically correct” means aligning oneself with whoever happens to represent the hegemonic order.

Clearly, given the habitual (mindless or malign) misuse of the term “political correctness” we might do better to drop it altogether. And if we cannot get rid of this slippery term we should aim to reverse its current usage, and seek to clarify its meaning as “hegemonic correctness.” It may be tempting to pretend, along with the homophobic majority, that there is a phantom power watching over the Polish queer community and enabling Poles to resist racism, sexism, homophobia and extreme nationalism. But perhaps instead of endorsing phantoms we should draw strength from being “politically incorrect,” and focus on preventing the gay-rights debate from being dismissed with the facile charge of its “correctness.”

A remarkable difference between *Out Here* and its predecessor is that many more Polish and other East-European authors in the present volume have undertaken direct political and cultural reflection on the historical contingencies of the local context. Unlike the previous bilingual volume, this one contains only those papers which were originally presented in English; a parallel volume of papers in Polish will be published by the Cracow Universitas publishing house. Among the essays in English, Tomek Kitliński and Joe Lockard offer a polemical diagnosis of homophobia and misogyny embodied in various Polish state and cultural institutions, Irina Kupriyanova describes the difficulties in implementing proper standards for counseling lesbian women in Russia, and Anna Borgos writes about bisexuality and biphobia from a Hungarian perspective. Alfons Gregori i Gomis undertakes a queer-political critique of Spanish and Catalan pop, and Els De Vos explains the spatial and cultural complexities of cruising in a Belgian park. Krzysztof Fordoński is interested in how the question of authors’ well-documented or alleged homosexuality is (or—

more often—is not) addressed in Polish handbooks and anthologies of English literature. Antke Engel starts by outlining the concepts of desire in Foucault and in Deleuze/Guattari, and argues that desire can be politically effective only if we attend to the ways in which singularities are transformed into specific categories. Tadeusz Rachwał's "Normally," the keynote address of our Bielsko-Biała conference in May 2003, is also a philosophical argument which draws on Kierkegaard, Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti, and Irigaray for the possibility of redrafting the present regimes of queer intelligibility. Tadeusz Rachwał's contribution, Anna Branach-Kallas's reading of Shaym Selvaduri's *Funny Boy*, Ewa Macura's reading of Vernon Lee's *Lady Tal*, Zuzanna Szatanik's paper on Chandra Mayor's poetry, and Krzysztof Fordoński's survey of Polish handbooks of English literature remind us that English and American studies departments in Poland were not only among the first places where interest in queer subjects was allowed to flourish, but that they remain interested and supportive. The English-language section also includes two short stories by Ruth DyckFehderau, one of a number of queer scholars who have recently stayed in Poland as visiting professors. Chris Bell is another such scholar, and his contribution to this volume, which tackles the psycho-social knot of sexuality and race/ethnicity, is one that inspired in us a sense of future direction.

Looking through the prism of sexuality and gender, the authors of *Out Here* offer analyses remarkably in sync with the present historical moment. For we are at a cross-roads, requiring that we look in more than one direction. Intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity, are familiar to many in academia but not always a staple in intellectual debates and teaching. While the concurrence of gender and queer issues in Poland seems well established, though not exactly in the center of the political arena—even as it seems, remarkably, to be the country's longest-standing coalition since 1989—this coalition is marginalized not only by the hegemony of cultural conservatives, but also by its own difficulty in addressing issues of economic inequality and other forms of discrimination. There is no adequate cultural criticism of the remnants of class-based distinctions in our post-Communist society, or of the new forms of such distinctions. Also the nationalistic projection of Poland as an ethnically homogeneous country that has no real need to address questions of ethnicity is perniciously widespread. It seems symptomatic to us that issues of class and race/ethnicity are more readily raised by non-Poles contributing to this volume.

We recognize these limitations, as we recognize that the breakthrough billboard campaign of 2003, mentioned above, was limited by the somewhat gentrified, vanilla look of almost all photographed couples, the young age of all but one, and the notable absence of a single photograph taken in the countryside (in a country where a full quarter of the population lives in rural areas). One should note, however, that the photographs are an archival record of the state of

LGBTQ activism in Poland today, and that the lives of some individuals who were photographed as part of the campaign have changed for it. While analogous claims should not be made for the present volume, some of the essays ring with a sense of urgency, reflecting the tone of current debates about Poland's LGBTQ activism. The analyses contained herein are elements in the landscape of such debates, in Poland and elsewhere.

The 2004 Wrocław conference was marked by fault lines in our discussions of sexuality in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, and other categories which define positionality. As at other conferences, we ended with an open forum whose goal was to propose a topic for the next event. In this discussion, positionality was again pointed out by many as a crucial question for further debate, and it became the focus of our next annual meeting, in September 2005.

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