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Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*

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In her novel *House of Day, House of Night* (2003), the Polish writer and 2018 Nobel Laureate Olga Tokarczuk takes the reader to the Polish-Czech borderland, some years after the fall of Communism (see Sandberg 2020). The story depicts the local community in the small, southwestern Polish village of Nowa Ruda, in which the narrator settles with her husband. In one of the many stories interwoven in this fascinating novel, Tokarczuk portrays the German couple Peter Dieter and his wife Erika visiting Nowa Ruda, which appears to be Peter Dieter’s childhood town. Nowa Ruda is situated in the historical province of Silesia—a region that has been under Bohemian, imperial German, Habsburg, Polish, Prussian, and later Nazi-German control. After WWII the region was allocated to Poland as a compensation for the Polish eastern territories annexed by the Soviet Union. The character Dieter could thus exemplify one of the many expelled Germans who had to flee when the Silesian province was returned to Poland due to the Potsdam Agreement of 1945.

During his memory tour, Dieter wants to take a hike in the mountains while his wife stays behind in the village. Like so many other German ‘Heimweh-Touristen’ or nostalgia tourists, Dieter is looking for signs and traces in the lost childhood landscape and he aims at an overview from the very top of the mountain. As it happens, Dieter has a heart attack climbing the trail, and he dies, lying directly on the Polish-Czech border, literally with one leg in Poland and the other in the Czech Republic. As dusk falls, Dieter is discovered by two Czech border guards. After identifying the body as a German, the border guards glance at their watches, then at each other. In silent agreement, they carefully slide Dieter’s leg over to the Polish side of the border. They quickly leave the place. One hour later, two Polish border
guards discover Dieter’s dead body lying on Polish territory. After having identified the body too, “then, in devout silence, they grab the legs and arms and drag the body over to the Czech side of the border” (Tokarczuk 2003, 92).

This story about pushing a dead body back and forth across a political border, at the “Länder Dreieck” between Germany, Poland and the (since 1993) Czech Republic, evokes deeper historical issues about identity and belonging in this particular part of Europe (Wampuszyć 2014, 374). There is a strong symbolism in the way this German is pushed aside and away; he neither belongs here nor there. Tokarczuk’s novel thus also deals with the complex relations of place and belonging—who belongs where is not an easy thing to decide in Silesia.

I first read Tokarczuk’s novel while doing fieldwork for my ethnological PhD research in Lower Silesia, in close proximity to Tokarczuk’s Nowa Ruda. Conducted in 2006, a few years after Poland joined the EU in 2004 and right before the country entered the Schengen agreement in 2007, my research focused on everyday Europeanisation in the twin towns of Görlitz and Zgorzelec. Originally one, the town was divided into a German and a Polish part by the new Oder-Neisse border of 1945, following the river Neisse. This historically burdened border topos thus made a vibrant laboratory for studying ideals of reconciliation, tolerance and cross-border activity in an enlarged EU (Sandberg 2016).

Tokarczuk’s novel is fictitious, however reading novels related to my field of inquiry proved an important entrance into a more nuanced understanding of complex, historical issues of these borderlands. Along with a bricolage of ethnographic methods and materials, fiction such as literature can be used as a further tool for cultural analysis (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2015). Novels offer insights and perspectives on themes that can be strange, exotic, surprising, or blindingly familiar in relation to our usual understanding of things. As fieldworkers we engage with our research participants in order to better understand their worlds, their views, their struggles—and most often with changed self-perception as a result. Literature and the world of fiction provide similar self-moving entrances into the perspectives of fellow human beings across time and space.

In my research, Tokarczuk helped open up new understandings of the co-existence of different but related border logics in the European border regime, past and present (Sandberg 2018). There is a strong resemblance, for instance, between the dead body being pushed back and forth across the border in Tokarczuk’s novel and the migrants of the Mediterranean Sea, who continue to drown even after the European ‘refugee crisis’ was redirected or moved elsewhere after the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016. In September 2015 the discovery of the body of the three-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed up on the shores of Bodrum, embodied this mass death related to the refugee arrivals from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to Europe. Like Tokarczuk’s border guards, the EU member states continuously push away the issue of migration, or the drowned bodies, back out into the waters, so to speak. The migrant mortalities of the Mediterranean give rise to similar unanswered questions: Whose trouble is it? Who should take responsibility of the dead bodies?
In recent decades the inner borders of the EU have dismantled from the outer edges of the nation states and diffused into European societies, not least due to new border technology, and surveillance techniques. The EU external borders on the other hand, have manifested themselves in even more concrete manners. Through so-called ‘push-backs’ the European border agency Frontex performs actions and maritime blockades at sea through which migrants are forcefully redirected and returned to where they came from.

Borders mark and divide not only territorial demarcations (so-called ‘green lines’) but also define who belongs where and why. For the same reason, this productive and performative character of the border has made it a keen object of ethnological investigation. The border situates itself in a permanent condition of ambiguity, because the border at one and the same time performs a line in the sand and can be porous and undefined. The absence and the presence of the border are thus two sides of the same coin.

The dead body on the Polish-Czech border represents a pre-Schengen Europe in which no convention would set the direction for cross-border police cooperation. However, despite the Schengen agreement being in force today, there are similarities between Tokarczuk’s border and the current European border logics. For instance, until 2020 the Dublin regulation stipulated that asylum applications should be examined in first arrival countries, meaning the country in which the applicant is first registered. This regulation did not spur collective responsibility and cross-border cooperation among EU member states. Migration researchers Ninna Nyberg Sørensen and Thomas Gammeltoft Hansen (2013) have argued that the EU external border control based on rejection and push-backs creates not only new markets for defence equipment and border technology but produces a ‘migration industry’ which includes dubious border agencies, profit seeking middlemen and unscrupulous human smugglers.

While the German body on the Polish-Czech border remains an impossible body, pushed over to the one side and then to the other, the bodies of the migration industry are pushed aside and away from being anyone’s problem and responsibility. The deceased migrants are salvaged by humanitarian activists in order to put them to rest, or they sink down on to the seabed remaining in the void between anyone’s responsibility. Tokarczuk’s novel thus inspired me to dig further into the multiplicity of ways that borders matter, while I was ‘reading from the border.’

Works Cited


