

Polish Literary Reckoning of the Post-WWII Population Resettlement: the Lens of “Tender Narrator”

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Abstract

This article investigates two literary texts, *House of Day, House of Night* (2002) by Olga Tokarczuk and *Piaskowa Góra* [Sand Mountain] (2009) by Joanna Bator and how they overcome the divisive and politicized narration of the post-WWII population expulsions and resettlement in Poland. The article argues that by employing the “tender narrator,” (Tokarczuk, 2019) e.g. directing readers’ attention to the former German items of everyday use and their stories, the writers create a more empathetic version of this period of history, thus recovering the memories of the, largely silenced, Polish and German experiences of displacement. Adopting postcolonial approaches, the article draws from affect theories and studies of how displaced populations relate emotionally to the changing material environment (Svašek, 2012) to examine the attitudes and emotions of the Poles dealing with the objects, landscape and property of the German deportees. These texts raise important questions about the foundations of the communities in the Polish-German borderlands, and their wider implications for Polish-German relations.

Keywords: Polish fiction, expulsions and population resettlement, displaced identities, World War II, Polish-German relations, “tender narrator”

1. Introduction

The postwar expulsion of the German population from the territory of modern day western Poland, when eight million people were forced to abandon their homes between 1944 and 1949, remains a difficult subject in Poland to date, that “can easily fall prey to political instrumentalization” (Thum, 2011, p. 35). Irene Sywenky (2013, p. 66) views the unease that accompanied the process of deportation of German inhabitants, to be replaced by new settlers, as “one of the historical silences that has been explored in recent Polish fiction.”

Critical examination of this period of Polish-German history has been hampered by the moral ambivalence and shame associated with local participation in these frequently violent resettlements and plundering, resulting in the loss of a post-war resettlement memory altogether.¹ At different times, discussion on the topic has erupted, exposing “strong divisions and contradictions in Poland’s national memory,” (Jasinska-Kania, 2014, p. 35). Competing experiences of suffering, as well as often hostile and resentful attitudes toward Germans, reaffirm and strengthen the stereotype of Germany as the “enemy” in World War II (Dettmer, 2020). Discussing the representation of these deportations in German and Polish literature, Katarzyna Śliwińska (2015) identified an important flashpoint in Polish-German communication about World War II and its aftermath: the right of the German deportees to demand recognition for the suffering and harm they experienced during their expulsion and the right to a public expression of the emotions accompanying this loss. This shortage of compassion or empathy makes it hard to find non-politicized language on this topic to facilitate Polish-German dialogue while equally accurately capturing the complex experiences of postwar forced migration (Thum, 2011). In the introduction to the first Polish language edition of *Expelled* (Pol. *Wypędzone*, 2013) that offered rare, first-hand accounts of the experiences of female German deportees, Zbigniew Gluza (2013) insists on seeing “[the

¹ The memoirs of German female deportees provide many details on the role of Poles in assisting in deportations: “The police with guns expel us from the town towards Fehebeutel and further through Gross Rosen (...) A step behind us follow Polish and Ukrainian civilians and plunder the most defenceless,” wrote Helene Plüschke, on 28 June 1945 (Plüschke et al., 2013, p. 38). On August 10th, she reports: “The harassment by the Poles becomes more severe. The complete state of anarchy allows them carry on with their activities without the fear of punishment” (*author’s translation*, p. 45.)

human in the postwar Germans” (p. 9), which, he argues, requires rejecting the narratives of recounting Polish-German history as rooted in the period of the war, maintained through most of the communist period. As many Poles are “still domesticating the German lands” and property taken over after the war, Gluza hints that the avoidance of confronting the experiences of the resettlement, ultimately denies access to knowledge about important aspects of Polish identity.

Among attempts to humanize the history of the deportation of Germans, the focus turns to their property and possessions, a subject touched upon by literary works centered on the Polish-German borderlands (Sywenky, 2013). As Karolina Kuszyk (2019) observed, research about the attitudes towards the German legacy centered mainly on the public sphere, the “visible” streets, monuments, squares and cemeteries. In her book, *Poniemieckie* [“post-German” or “formerly German”], one of the first such studies in Poland, Kuszyk traces the fate of German possessions through her own personal experience of growing up in a former German house in Legnica/Liegnitz. She remarks: “The education of the first two generations of displaced persons and settlers was marked by instilling hostility or, at best, distrust towards the Germans, while at the same time (...) the entire cosmos of everyday life, and even the tastes, were formed in relation to the objects, equipment and German spirit.” (n.p.). The German’s objects in private spaces and the new owners’ relationship to these items - furniture, dishes, oil prints, ashtrays, hangers, maps, postcards – have been left almost entirely to belles-lettres, concludes Kuszyk.

Kuczyk’s apt observation identifies literature’s ability to explore the personal, the intimate and the taboo, including complex and traumatic histories, a view captured in Olga Tokarczuk’s conceptualization of the “tender narrator.” First introduced by the writer in her Nobel Speech (2019), tenderness is a unique narrative perspective, enabling the storyteller and the reader to see more nuance and discover similarities, thus achieving a more empathetic understanding of the events: “Tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. Creating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences, the situations people have endured and their memories” (n.p.). Tokarczuk further philosophically elaborates on the concept in her collection of essays on the creative process and the role of literature in today’s world, titled, “Tender Narrator” (Pol. *Czuly narrator*, 2020), where she concludes that literature has “greater than anything else potential to portray the world through the holistic perspective of the mutual influences and connections” (p. 27).

What is of particular interest to the literary reckoning with the history of population displacement and resettlement is how this perspective can be employed to address a) the divisive narratives, b) silencing of the history of resettlement, c) the acquisition of German property and dispossessions, and d) the process of building new identities in relation to the foreign objects of the former enemy by the new settler communities, still a psychologically difficult subject for many Poles (Thum, 2011). Tokarczuk’s conceptualization of tender narrator as a way of conveying connections and similarities within fictional stories may be the antidote to the fossilized, divisive narratives mentioned by Gluza (2103) and Thum (2011), which prevent exploration of the real experiences of the expellees. Literature, as a way of building empathetic understanding, can counter the nationalistic, xenophobic, and often sanitizing accounts of Second World War history, which tend to portray the “traditional nationalistic image of Poland as the exceptional victim” (Jasinska-Kania, 2014, p. 36). It shifts the focus to nuanced explorations of personal experiences and considers German loss and suffering; without denying the suffering of the Poles, but rather as occurring alongside it. As such, literature has the power to change reality by shining a light on matters we have lost the ability to take notice of, or as Tokarczuk will say elsewhere, by allowing us “to see the imperceptible” (Burkhardt et. al 2010).

This article examines Olga Tokarczuk’s *House of Day, House of Night* (2002), and Joanna Bator’s *Piaskowa Góra*² [Sand mountain] (2009), as examples of the narratives that employ the perspective of “tender narrator,” to deal with the dominant discourse, or lack thereof, about postwar forced migration and population resettlement in Lower Silesia. In contrast to the aggressive policy by local governments of erasing any traces of the German presence, that had begun during the post-WWII period and continued through the communist era (Thum 2011, Kamusella 2004), the authors insist on reintroducing the pre-Yalta agreement (1945) German names of the places and German people connected to the now-Polish towns, places and buildings. By directing their readers’ attention to the former German objects of everyday use in the private sphere, their micro-stories and affective energies, issues invisible to its Polish owners, they connect the Polish and German experiences of displacement and resettlement, thus creating a personalized and empathetic version of the local history. The technique of inserting German possessions into the narrative about the Polish residents of towns, and describing how the new owners interact with or repurpose these belongings, allows the writers to convey a palimpsestic history where “present is shown to be shadowed or haunted by a past which is not immediately visible but is progressively brought into light” (Silverman, 2015, 3). At the same time, this “othering” of the space and places stresses the idea of “not our [Polish] history” (*PG*, p. 53) intensifying the sense of strangeness, which, as scholars

² All further textual references to *Piaskowa Góra* are annotated as *PG* throughout this paper. Translations of the selected excerpts from the novel from Polish into English are by the author of this paper.

identified, has a “definitive cognitive as well as affective character”; it is a transitional experience from emotion to knowledge where a strange feeling plays a role in building a new model of understanding to help a person adjust to an unfamiliar world (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015).

It is not without significance that both authors attracted wide readership and recognition in Germany, suggesting the relatability to German audiences of the portrayals, and their appreciation of the nuanced narratives about the deportations, from a Polish perspective.³ As such, the authors can be seen as ambassadors of Polish-German dialogue with regard to the topic. Notably, both writers have a personal connection to the region they describe. Bator’s novel is set in Wałbrzych/Waldenburg, the author’s place of birth, where Tokarczuk also spent a part of her life (Grossman, 2009, p. 283). Nowa Ruda/Neurode, where most of the stories in *House of Day*, *House of Night* take place is located in Lower Silesia, in the vicinity of Wałbrzych. Due to personal experiences unique to Polish communities of the region (nearly a third of Polish citizens were affected by the resettlement), including nostalgia-driven visits by Germans to the homes from which their families were expelled (now termed “homesick tourism” *Heimwehtourismus*, Marschall 2014), Bator and Tokarczuk are able to accurately convey the complex affects associated with building a life on someone else’s life, being surrounded by objects of the “enemy,” and the aftermath of that process.

House of Day, *House of Night* and *Piaskowa Góra* present us with the afterlife of the material environment, often neglected and appropriated, and the process of identity-building by the new Polish communities through their interactions with former German property. To analyse the process of building identities with the German objects, this article draws from the anthropological work of Maruška Svašek, who explores the relationship between emotions, material culture and migration, particularly in “transit” states, and other affect theories, which support the reading of the complex affects produced as a result of being surrounded by German belongings. Svašek’s insistence on people’s experiences of changing human and non-human environments as shaped by “specific interests and expectations that partially arise out of earlier experiences,” a perspective influenced by Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, stresses the importance of applying a postcolonial/postsocialist⁴ perspective to analyze the postwar population transfer. In particular, examining Poland’s rhetorically constructed, unique position between the West and East, and its “complex histories of dependence” as colonized and colonizing country (Gosk 2012, 200), helps us to shed light on the role of resentment as a significant characteristic in the Polish-German relationship.

The centralized narratives of the communist government began to be questioned by literary works as early as the 1990s, with the open endorsement of “peripheral, trans-border spaces” and identities; this literary and artistic production challenged the ethno-nationalistic discourse popularized during the Polish People’s Republic.⁵ This applies particularly to communist propaganda regarding former German territories, which the communist officials tried to legitimize by “penning a Polish mythology of the Recovered Lands” or even “essentially Polish” landscape, as Walig órska (2015, p. 90) puts it in her analysis of the German/Polish/Jewish borderlands. The Polish *Ziemia odzyskana* discourse (*Ger. Deutsche Ostgebiete/Recovered Territories*), drew from the medieval period of Piast Poland when, for three centuries, the lands of Silesia and Pomerania belonged to the Polish polity, while ignoring six centuries of German cultural presence in the region (Kamusella, 2017; Ochman 2013). This state-sanctioned simplifying of narratives of the post-German borderlands, which were multi-national and multi-ethnic and the site of complex identity negotiations,

³ Bator’s novel, translated into German in 2012 as *Sandberg*, was nominated for Herman Hesse literary award in 2018. Commenting on the award, Sabine Peschel provided an insightful evaluation of the novel, in terms of the potential reason for the appeal of the text to German audiences: “In her novels, Bator combined her own memories with things that have been historically transmitted, and others that are fictitious and fantastical, in such a way, that she exposed the nationalistic, chauvinistic and xenophobic side of Poland even before it became manifest in the national-conservative PiS party” (Translated from the German by Sebastian Truskolaski). See: Peschel, 2018.

⁴ The perspective employed in this paper draws, among others, from Lucy Mayblin, Aneta Piekut and Gill Valentine. ““Other” Posts in “Other” Places: Poland through a Postcolonial Lens?”. *Sociology*. 2016 Feb 50(1):60-76.

⁵ Elżbieta Rybicka (2002), summarises the main shift in the post-1989 literature: “The first phase of this evolution, back in the 1990s, may be described as the discovery of a new map. This was no longer the old political map, on which the whole country was marked in one colour, but a map of multi-ethnicity and multi-nationality, in which various tints overlapped in various areas, blending into multicolour patches. The second significant process happening in the 1990s was the creation of a new, symbolic geography – decentralised, and openly endorsing peripheral, trans-border spaces.” (p. 30).

have been interrogated, particularly, by writers with a personal connection to the region, such as Bator and Tokarczuk;⁶ both authors clearly engage with and complicate the rhetoric of the “recovered territories.” Their literary interrogation of historical accounts coincided with new historical research on the “recovered lands” which primarily focused on previously censored aspects, such as the property provision process and Red Army violence (Tuszynski and Denda 1999), the widespread practice of *szabrownictwo*, i.e. looting (Thum, 2011) as well as the anger and disappointment of repatriates who lost their property as a result of the deportations (Kamusella 2012).

2. When “The Teapot Starts to Talk”: Recovering German Memories

The structure of *House of Day, House of Night*, a fragmented, patchwork-style story told by an unknown female narrator, a resident of Nowa Ruda (Ger. Neurode), is an attempt to sew together the pieces of different times and histories in the Polish-German borderland: an old German legend of the “Silesian saint,” Kummernis, and the dreams (some of them from the Internet) of the contemporary Polish inhabitants of the region (*HoD*, p. 206).⁷ The stories span from the Middle Ages until the end of German Silesia in 1945, through the (re)settlement of Poles in the territories of the former German Reich up to the 1990s. The legend of Kummernis, a saint-martyr, takes up much of the narrative, and is intertwined with stories about German people connected to Nowa Ruda, such as Tüntzel, the founder of Neurode/Nowa Ruda, the family of Franz Frost, a man drafted into the Wehrmacht and killed soon after, and Von Goetzen, who lived in a mansion near Waldenburg/Wałbrzych with his family but who was driven out of his property by the Soviet army at the end of the war (*HoD*, p. 192-201). All these stories reflect personal entanglement with larger historic events: “While the re-imagined historical life of the town restores its complex geopolitical identity, it is the more recent stories—still sustained by the intergenerational memory of the post-war period—that must have particular resonance with the contemporary Polish reader” (Sywenky, 2013, p. 76).

The past, which informs the present, is not always clear to the residents of Nowa Ruda. When coaches full of Germans arrive in town (possibly around the late 1980s or 1990s, since they pay with Marks), proceeding to “take photos of empty spaces,” the local residents find it puzzling (*HoD*, p. 91). The narrator describes one such German couple, with whom they exchanged Christmas cards. In one, the German family reassured the narrator that “the Frost family was no longer interested in [their] house”. The narrator asks Marta “resentfully”, why anyone would be interested in her house, to which Marta replies: “Because they built it” (*HoD*, p. 92). Here Tokarczuk not only shows the interconnected nature of Polish and German lives but touches upon the loss of memory of the postwar resettlement, afforded only to the older generations, who might have witnessed it. Marta, an elderly, enigmatic wig-maker and one of the main heroines of the story, has an ambiguous status in the story; possibly a neighbor of the said Frost family, who had lived next to a “wig-maker” before the war. This would suggest that Marta witnessed the periods of “German” and “Polish” Silesia. Marta’s remarks are often profound and metaphorical, such as her conclusion about the occupation of former German properties: “the most important human duty is to save things that are falling into decay, rather than create new ones.” (*HoD*, p. 92). Marta sees and understands more and as such she can be viewed as the embodiment of the tender narrator, a kind of mediator between peoples and times.

While Marta’s answer is empathetic, for the majority of Poles in town witnessing visiting Germans, the main emotion is that of resentment: the Germans emerging from the coaches have clean white shoes, give away money and candies to children, making the Poles, now impoverished by the communist regime, feel like beggars (*HoD*, p. 91). During the communist period, argued Gosk (2007), Poles, impoverished both economically and culturally, resented the Germans and felt humiliated by them. Poles’ lack of reflection on the nostalgia of the Germans, their loss, and the general uncomfortable feelings prompted by their visits, suggests what Kuszyk (2019) described as a feeling of “inappropriateness,” an unspoken, shameful awareness of building one’s life on someone else’s land, using their property. In addition to that, the German presence in town likely provokes a fear of the group seeking restitution for lost property. As Menon (2020) indicates, the postwar forced resettlement of Germans echoes through the decades, with various German organizations (e.g. The Federation of Expellees formed in 1957) and activists demanding compensation for property lost as a result of the postwar agreements.

Tokarczuk and Bator are both curious about the moment of transition, when “German” life transforms into “Polish” life, when the German place names are changed to Polish⁸ and when, “after boiling, *Wasser* changes into *woda* [Pol. water]”

⁶ Not only does Tokarczuk reside in the former German territories but, according to an interview with *The Guardian*, is a descendant of the deportees, whose father’s family “were refugees from a part of Poland that is now in Ukraine” (Armistead, 2018).

⁷ All further references to *House of Day, House of Night* are annotated as *HoD* throughout this paper.

⁸ Tokarczuk engages with the process of renaming, as the narrator ponders: “Who was the guy who spent his nights changing German place names into Polish ones? (...) He made Nieroda out of Vogelsberg, he patriotically rechristened

(*PG*, p. 12). Through this focus, they create a sense of fluidity about these border spaces, a narrative that contradicts the attitudes of Polish officials and the first settlers in the region, also represented in the novels. Bator's *Piaskowa Góra*⁹ [Sand mountain] (2009) is set in Wałbrzych (Ger. Waldenburg), in Lower Silesia, a region particularly affected by the rapid and often violent nature of forced displacement due to its large population of autochthons, ethnic Germans. Here, the Polish government applied particularly aggressive policies to rigidly suppress all traces of Germanness that "might obscure the Polish character of the region" (Thum, 2011, p. 87). The industrialized region of Upper Silesia was a preferred choice of the Polish "miners and vocational training workers returning from France, who settled in the Silesian mining areas" (Thum 2011, p. 70). Bator's story follows one such family of miners, the Chmura family, through a nonlinear storyline spanning the postwar period until the 1990s.

The first Poles arriving in the region of Waldenburg, in *Piaskowa Góra*, are "still smelling of gun powder", shouting *Hitler kaput!* to the remaining Germans in town. They quickly take over and divide the land into "what is mine" and "what is yours," guarding their new properties "armed with sticks and bad words" (*PG*, p. 8). The building of new life, Bator suggests, is characterized by partition on a mini scale, as well as a disregard for the German items found in former German homes where, "Gothic books" are used for kindling in the stove (*PG*, p. 12). As a result, precious objects of cultural and nostalgic value fall into oblivion.

However, Bator's narrator, unlike most of the inhabitants of *Piaskowa Góra* (a district of Wałbrzych), who have no interest in the previous residents of the town, introduces a layered narrative, where the German past and the Polish present constantly intertwine, or to use Irene Sywenky's (2013) phrase, "invade each other." (p. 76). Early on in the novel, the narrator states that: "underneath Wałbrzych there is coal, on the surface there is sand and the people who drifted here from the world in the place of the expelled" (*PG*, p. 10). The connected stories of people and their belongings, as well as narrative features such as nonlinear narration and attention to the invisible and non-obvious - objects and their previous owners - support this palimpsestic presentation of history. One such example is when the narrator suddenly shifts the focus from the main story of a Polish family to describe how a "twelve person Bavarian dining service with a pink roses pattern" was buried under the ground by Frau Emmel, before she was forced to abandon her property (*PG*, p. 31). In Max Silverman's (2015) words, the invisible past is "progressively brought into light" and shadows the now Polish present.

After her arrival in Wałbrzych from Zalesie sometime in the 1970s, the main heroine of *Piaskowa Góra*, Jadzia Maślak, marries a miner, Stefan Chmura. At their wedding, Jadzia wears a dress made from "previously German curtain" (*poniemecka firana*) (*PG*, p. 58). Here the narrator diverts from the story of Jadzia to Fraulein Herta Korn, who herself embroidered the "muslin curtain," now Jadzia's dress, with a "magic landscape" and who "deeply regretted" leaving it behind in Waldenburg [Wałbrzych]" (*PG*, p. 59). The focus on the *poniemecki* curtain shifts the narrative to the affects with which the curtain was invested by the previous owner: a great effort to create it, nostalgia, and regret at its loss. Small pieces of the previous owner's life are introduced, personalizing the object, which, as the reader learns, is connected to someone else's life, and infused with memories. Whether Jadzia is aware of the history and sentimental value of the curtain or not, the object becomes tied to her new life as a new citizen of Wałbrzych and now, as a married woman. The reader however, cannot "un-know" the details about the curtain's past provided to him or her by the storyteller: this, unwillingly, produces a new insight about the intimate relation between the German and Polish women connected by this shared object.

Bator's constant shifting of focus to former German belongings suggests the presence of a "tender narrator". Tokarczuk writes: "Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed. It is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk." (Tokarczuk, 2019, n.p.; see also Turp-Balazs, 2020). Tokarczuk's unique take on the German dispossessed objects, which do not only exude feelings, such as nostalgia or sadness of the expelled, but can do things to their new owners, is expressed, for example, by her use of personalization and personification. Referring to the process of transfer of the German properties to the new owners, the narrator describes German houses as in time growing "more willing to surrender their contents to their new Polish owners" (*HoD*, p. 242). This personification of the houses, who have a "will to surrender", reflects what Sywenky (2013) interpreted as "a strong feeling of non-belonging and trespassing, of unlawful possession" (p. 77). Personification as a device that brings to life "something abstract, collective, inanimate, dead" (Fowler 2017, p. 1026) enables the building of relationships between inanimate objects and people, hence forcing

Gotschenberg with the name Polish Mountain, he turned the melancholy sounding *Flucht* into the banal *Rzędzina*, but changed *Magdal-Felsen* into *Bógdał*." (*HoD*, p. 176.)

⁹ All further references to *Piaskowa Góra* are annotated as *PG* throughout this paper. Translations of the selected excerpts from the novel from Polish into English are by the author of this article.

the reader to develop empathy and a new understanding. Tokarczuk's story revolves around inanimate objects and their affective energies: both as affects exuded by these objects, but also as the emotions and thoughts with which the owners invest their possessions. This approach is best shown when Marta, the wig-maker, answers a question about wigs: "What about a person who wears a wig made of someone else's hair?", to which Marta's response is: "It takes courage (...) [those people] have to take on the thoughts of the person the hair came from. They have to be ready for someone else's thoughts, and they must be strong and impervious by nature" (*HoD*, p. 68-69). This suggests no strict division exists between the object (cut hair) and a person, who, through interacting with it, can "experience" the presence of the previous owner. Material things, those of everyday use, are invested with emotions, thoughts and energies which are passed onto their new owners.

3. Building a Polish Life with Strange German Objects

Focus on the emotive energies discharged by objects is particularly interesting in relation to the process of building identity by the new, mainly ethnically Polish, settlers surrounded by German objects. It raises important questions, such as what were the interactions and affective responses of Poles to "enemy" property acquired at the end of the Second World War, and how did their perceptions of the Germans before and during the war shape their attitudes toward their newly acquired property? Human interaction with material things has been studied by scholars such as Maruška Svašek, whose anthropological work offers a new perspective on the relationships between migration, emotions and material culture, particularly in "transit states," i.e. when people and things cross geographical, social and cultural boundaries. "Transition identifies transit-related changes in the meaning, value and emotional efficacy of objects and images as opposed to simply changes in their location or ownership," explains Svašek, adding that the process of transition can radically alter the significance of an object (p. 3). According to Kuszyk (2019), the new inhabitants of the German territories incorporated into western Poland had to create their identity anew. That meant dealing with the "foreignness" or "otherness" of the furniture, china or kitchen appliances they found in their new homes: in practice, it also meant suppressing the idea that the objects belonged to Germans altogether.

Yet, undeniably the feelings of the new owners in relation to their new material environment had to produce some reactions. The scale of shared experience of building life in these formerly German territories, surrounded by things that came with "inherited" properties, which applies to about a third of the population of Poland, is embodied in the Polish adjective *poniemiecki*, (Ger. *ehemals Deutsch*), which came to be used after the Second World War to name houses, dishes, farming machines and other items, which were "formerly German," "post-German," or "left after the Germans".¹⁰ Halina, one of the protagonists of *Piaskowa Góra* who arrived in Wałbrzych after the war, each day wakes up in the wide, wooden bed that "belonged to the Germans" under the painting of Jesus which also "belonged to the Germans" (*PG*, p. 97). It is hard to conclude to what extent Halina, like the narrator, is constantly reminded that most of her possessions belonged to someone else (a former enemy) and the effect it has on her life. The insistence of the writer in emphasizing the "Germanness" of things used by the Polish settlers in their new homes, directs attention to the problem of how individuals relate emotionally when surrounded by objects which underline their non-belonging. For example, Halina's chain-smoking, which followed her moving in to this *poniemiecki* house, could be an indication of anxious feelings at the strange presence exuded by the personal items of its former German occupants.

In the two sections of Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night* which center specifically on the arrival of the Poles from the eastern outskirts of Poland to the village of Einsiedler (later Polish, Pietno) in Lower Silesia, Tokarczuk recovers the sense of strangeness, mentioned by Kuszyk, that seems to permeate the first experiences of the settlers. The narrative focuses on representing intense emotions arising between the Poles and Germans, hitherto enemies at war, who are forced to live together for several months between spring and autumn 1945, until the Germans are expelled from their homes. The following excerpt captures the range of affects when, after months of journey by train, Poles from the eastern outskirts of Poland arrive at Einsiedler and see a glimpse of the new landscape for the first time:

The whole scene was gently undulating. It made the weaker among them, the women and old men, feel sick; the whole place was so empty and alien that some even let out a sob, as memories of those gold-green plains they had left behind went through their heads (*HoD*, p. 233).

The Polish evacuees are randomly allocated to different houses where the previous owners still reside; in the end, they live together for several months. "Germans awaiting expulsion had to share their 'de-Germansed property' (houses, flats, farms) with the new Polish owners that in the atmosphere of the anti-German feeling often led to acrimony, humiliation, and even to murder and lynching," writes Kamusella (2004, p. 29). Although Tokarczuk portrays distressed Germans forced to part with their homes and beloved things – expressed in their later "nostalgia trips," such as the story of Peter

¹⁰ The Polish PWN dictionary defines "*poniemiecki*" as a word describing "property, land remaining after the Germans who until the World War II lived in the Western territories of today's Poland." See also: Śliwińska, 2013.

Dieter, who dies of a heart attack during one of those emotional visits – the major focus is on the emotions arising from the new communities' encounters with the objects acquired or taken over from the Germans. The affective responses that come to the forefront of these depictions are feelings of strangeness, anxiety and resentment. Located between "cognition and emotion," these affects can be linked to a chain of events that accompanies the process of the population, and property transfer, such as the feeling of being out of place and moral unease (Lays 2011). As was mentioned earlier, strangeness can be seen as a transition state from emotion to knowledge, which helps people to adapt to a new situation (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). However, on closer inspection, these affects provide insights into the extent to which emotional expressions are determined by past experiences, some of which are passed on or conditioned by the experiences of previous generations.

The unfamiliarity of the differently built farms, household inventions and dishes, produce an uncomfortable sensation of being out of place for Poles, who do not know "what to do with themselves" (*HoD*, p. 237). The feeling of non-belonging, being lost, and a sense of unlawful trespassing, push the Poles into excessive drinking ("some of them were never sober") (*HoD*, p. 236). Even though the narrator suggests hatred as the main cause of drinking, the frequent outbursts of anger and violence clearly suggest a venting of a sense of shame at participating in this morally ambiguous situation. Poles justify their hostility by reminding themselves that they are the true victims of the war, with the Germans getting what they deserved given that it was their fault that Poles had to leave their "extensive fields in the east" (*HoD*, p. 237). With time, the initial sense of guilt at taking over German-owned property, as ordained by the authorities following the Yalta Conference, and seeing the distress and sadness of the Germans (*HoD*, p. 235), shifts into a sense of entitlement. Frustrated with waiting for the Germans to leave, Poles remove their holy icons and replace them with their own "very similar, maybe identical, Christs and Madonnas" (*HoD*, p. 237). This suggests the desire to overcome the sense of non-belonging, as "things out of place might come to stand for people out of place" (Svašek 2012, p. 17); using familiar objects helps to build a sense of home. Arguably, by focusing on the increasing hostility and entitlement of the Poles, Tokarczuk confronts the readers with the question of Polish accountability for the suffering of the local German population during the process of expulsion.¹¹

We also see echoes of what Thomas Urban (2007) termed a "civilisational shock," experienced by the resettled populations arriving in German towns that add to the feeling of being out-of-place. The majority (nearly eighty percent) came from villages and small towns, were unfamiliar with the running water or telephones found in the abandoned houses, as well as other "strange" inventions. In the novel, Poles, shy and awkward at first, eye the habits of Germans with suspicion: "How strangely they ate!" German farms are far more advanced, with none of the settlers understanding how to operate their farm machinery (*HoD*, p. 236). Upon arrival in Einsiedler, one of the protagonists "searched anxiously for the well" only to later find a water pump inside the house (*HoD*, p. 234-35). This civilizational strangeness was often domesticated by "indifference" towards those inventions while the lack of proper knowledge about their purpose resulted in neglect or even acts of vandalism (Urban, 2007, p. 174). Destroying German property in the immediate postwar period was partially dictated by the desire for revenge or hatred (Mach, 1998; Maciorowski, 2010); yet, the end of war did not end the destruction and the wave of vandalism (Thum, 2011). Therefore, it could be suggested that the plundering and demolition of German property was partly fueled by resentment, frequently demonstrated through violence or greed (Ferro, 2010).

Writing about the difficult psychological situation of *kresowiacy*, a common, although contested, name for the settlers from the eastern Polish borderlands, which embraced other ethnic and national groups such as Lemko or Ukrainians, Gregor Thum (2011) argued that their sense of uprootedness and distress at losing their property in the East, was not eased by the material improvement that came with acquisition of new property in the former German lands. Tokarczuk, however, provides a more ambiguous portrayal of the attitudes of the resettlers from the East than Thum's clearly sympathetic and rather one-sided representation of this issue. While stressing the postwar organizational chaos of the Polish authorities ("there was no one in charge (...) the [Polish] authorities were only dreaming themselves up", *HoD*, p. 232), and the hardship experienced by the migrants during their two-month train journey, the readers also learn that during the journey to the West, Polish evacuees were told about "empty stone houses with furniture and fittings beyond their wildest dreams" waiting for them in German villages. The narrator continues: "As they breast-fed their children, the young women dreamt of wardrobes full of silk dresses, leather shoes with heels, handbags with gold-plated clasps ..." (*HoD*, p. 232). Whether forced migrants, as in Tokarczuk's story, or whether the protagonists chose to resettle to the formerly German territory, these "recovered territories," appear as a Promised Land. Those arriving from

¹¹ It is important to note that deportation of the Germans did not only begin at the end of the war but had different stages. As Vickers (2015) noted, some Germans were subject to so-called "wild expulsions" [*wilde Vertreibungen/dzikie wysiedlenia*], which took place prior to the deportations officially sanctioned by the Potsdam Agreement.

the east imagine it as a place that offers the possibility to reinvent themselves, particularly for those ashamed of their status or heritage, but also an opportunity for social and economic advancement, given that material objects, land or work prospects, have the capacity to “increase feelings of well-being and belonging” (Svašek 2012, p. 2). Miners in Lower Silesia, such as the family of Stefan Chmura in Bator’s *Piaskowa Góra*, viewed the process of resettlement as a prospect for social advancement in a country devastated by postwar poverty and unemployment.

4. German Territories as Promised Land: A Postcolonial and Post-Socialist Reckoning of Resentment

When the Poles in Tokarczuk’s story arrive, anxious and reluctant, in an unfamiliar place, their resentment towards the Germans is palpable and soon appears as the driving force of their actions. It is initially expressed through their passive hostility in refusing to work: “while the Germans were still there they didn’t have to” (*HoD*, p. 237). It is not simply that the Germans were the hated enemy – their solid brick houses, built-in pumps and many other previously unseen inventions spoke of advancement and superiority, reminding the Poles of their own backwardness, back in the East. When, in autumn 1945, the Polish official finally comes to Einsiedler to remove two German women, now living with the Polish family of Mr. and Mrs. Bobol, the Poles display no sympathy at their fate; they are about to lose all their life possessions. Resisting the eviction, an older German woman, seizes “a china bowl” from the kitchen in a desperate act to hold onto something familiar, yet Bobol tries to “tear it from her grip” (*HoD*, p. 237). The German woman showers Bobol in curses; cursing his family, his health, his property, animals, and his food. The mutual resentment expressed in this cursing and in fighting stubbornly for this small object, becomes embodied affect in the Polish-German borderland.

This resentment, which may be manifested in the present in the form of hostility, anger or violence, has its roots in the past, and thus the application of a postcolonial lens to interpret resentment is illuminating when discussing its causes. As Marc Ferro observes in *Resentment in History* (2010, p. 127), resentment arises from humiliation or a trauma caused by “social extraction”, “physical weakness” and more generally, by an inferiority complex. Scholars observed that certain social groups are more prone to resentment because their social position is experienced as “inherently humiliating” or because they are socially powerless, such as Poland was during the German occupation in the twentieth century, but also in the nineteenth century under partitions (Becker & Becker, 2001). Considering the consequences of political dependence in Poland, Hanna Gosk (2012) insists on a specifically Polish inferiority complex, the “Polish complex,” which results from the prolonged periods of subjugation. She frames it in postcolonial terms: “the ‘Polish complex’ implies both the Polish sense of inferiority, deficiency, injustice and incomprehension, but also the conglomerate of problems that do not occur elsewhere at the same level of entanglement and intricacy, thus engendering a specific sense of the identity of the oppressed as exceptional, unique, and unrepeatable” (p. 203). It is not difficult to see how colonial exploits, including violent periods of occupation, create “nests” of resentment among the affected population: “the condition of debasement into which the oppressed are pushed produces, in turn, cynical mindsets, shameless and thoughtless conduct, or, at best, passive resignation” (Gosk, 2012, p. 207). This justifies resentment, accompanied by other emotions such as shamelessness, violence or even greed. Moreover, resentment, unlike envy, for example, tends to be a public emotion, shared and supported collectively, that evokes notions of justice. As Ferro notes, after the war, the resentment of the Poles towards the “German ‘butchers’ was extreme”¹² and such resentment tends to breed revenge, explaining the brutality that accompanied the “recovery” of the German territory in 1945-46 (p.77). Dispossessing Germans of their last objects, exemplified in Bobol ripping the china bowl from the hands of the elderly German woman, satisfied the need of revenge and fed the resentment. Yet, looking solely to the Second World War does not explain the experience of resentment towards the Germans, which continued throughout the communist period until the present, as evidenced in a politics towards Germany based on the “renewal of old wounds” (Dettmer 2020).

In *Piaskowa Góra*, the phrase *Ziemie Odzyskane* (recovered territories), which Bator’s narrator stubbornly repeats with a sense of irony, clearly features in the collective consciousness as a place in the West that holds a promise of wealth and stability: “Walbrzych regained land raises hopes especially in those who never had their own land. They came from nowhere, but they want to make it to become somebody. First they occupy the old houses after Germans but soon these are not sufficient” (*PG* p. 12). Here Bator touches upon “affective possibilities” (Svašek, 2012, p. 13), a possibility of reinventing one’s identity in a new place of residence, in new surroundings. Those resettled from the eastern lands are mainly peasants, who, for generations, were exploited as serfs for landlords, never owning the land they worked. They came from “nowhere,” embodying the narrative of periphery: a place with no significance, no culture, a wild place. This is stressed by Bator’s use of irony when portraying the indifference and ignorance of the protagonists participating in a larger historical process, such as Halina (“the train slowly moved towards the Recovered Territories, in which recovery

¹² There is something to be said about the perception of Poland’s humiliating position (i.e. resulting from the German occupation) in the eyes of other European countries, as observed by Ferro. For example, Mussolini commented on Germany’s behaviour in Italy with indignation: “They are treating us like Poles,” while Pétain and Laval justified their policy of collaboration stating they wanted to “avoid the fate of Poland” (Ferro, 2010, p. 77).

she had no interest, nor she had contributed to it in any way” (*PG*, p. 131)), underlining Halina’s passive and unreflective participation in the displacement and resettlement process. Nevertheless, Bator’s protagonists manifest a deeply-seated need for roots, land and property as the newly arriving settlers from the East. The Polish newcomers encourage each other to have children so at least they would be born “with roots,” since their own roots were cut, and could claim this new place as their own (*PG*, p. 52). Such a near compulsive need to reproduce manifests a sense of insecurity, or even fear, at the possibility of being displaced again without a chance of building a home.

“At the beginning everybody was digging in the soil, and it wasn’t for potatoes. The whole courtyard in front of the house was dug through in search of what Germans had buried,” ironically relates Bator’s narrator (*PG*, p. 69). Each person hoped to find a different treasure, with expectations of “golden marks and silver candlesticks,” “Eva Braun’s jewellery,” or even that of Hitler himself. Similarly, in *House of Day, House of Night*, the Poles are portrayed digging, finding it a form of distraction, and indeed an exciting new emotion, in their attempts to discover objects of value hidden by the Germans. Even though the Poles arrived with only few items to find the large farm-houses full of “pots, plates, mugs with handles, bedding, and clothes that were almost new, some of them truly elegant” (*HoD*, p. 243), they did not sow the field for a year but would go “treasure hunting” instead (*HoD*, p. 244). Tokarczuk’s narrator provides the following explanation for this compulsive behavior: “There was a dreamlike quality to this treasure hunting; it was like tracking down the roots of a dangerous, alien plant that might start growing again one day, that might rob them of all their possessions and hound them back into homelessness” (*HoD*, p. 244). Rather than a greed for the material possessions, Tokarczuk suggests the Poles experience a kind of anxiety at the notion of German presence, even in face of their physical absence, what she conveys through her references to an “alien plant;” elsewhere she adds that “an alien smell” lingered in the kitchens and bedrooms (*HoD*, pp. 242, 243). In Tokarczuk’s story this “treasure hunting,” referred to in Polish as *szaber*, i.e. the looting that began as soon as the Germans had left, continues well into contemporary times as the grandsons of the farmers “were still looking for treasure; they bought metal detectors from the Ukrainians at the market and waded through waist-high grass”. Ultimately, the activity of looting is driven by the notion that valuable things are there to be found, what, in this context, highlights the perception of Germans as well off, and the Poles as impoverished.

The desire for the land, a commodity as per Arjun Appadurai’s understanding (2013), rests not only in acquiring material goods but also acquiring status in a social hierarchy, as well as respectability. Writing about the colonized people’s desire for land, Frantz Fanon (2014) considers it “the value that is most essential”, because it provides bread and dignity. Fanon touches upon the issue of mimicry expressed in the desire of the colonial subjects to emulate the culture of the colonizer, or the culture perceived as superior to one’s own culture expressed in a gaze that is “a look of lust, a look of envy” (p. 5). Even though not strictly a colonized nation, as many have observed, the old colonial powers of Western Europe “have exerted a significant imperial influence over trajectories of social difference” in multiple spheres of national life in Poland (Mayblin, 2016, p. 61). Fanon’s description of the lust for things of the “superior” culture echoes in Bator’s story, where, impoverished economically by the communist system, Poles desire the German lifestyle. The novel conveys how the economic discrepancy between the communist East and “free” West breeds a culture of emulation, a culture of mimicry that takes place behind the Iron Curtain. Women from Babel, a new socialist housing estate in Wałbrzych, lend each other “Otto”, a German fashion magazine, “not only for the pure pleasure of looking,” as observed by the narrator, “but also to copy this elegant world in their own houses, and on their own bodies, although with much more limited means than the neighbors from behind the western border” (*PG*, p. 186). As Kuszyk (2019) remarked, everyday life, even the tastes of western Poles, were shaped in relation to those of the Germans, a statement about the abandoned German legacy in many households, which also applied to the perception of Germany as more advanced economically.

There is also an interesting gender dimension to this desire of becoming like the superior Other, for, while Fanon speaks about the colonized people’s desire to sleep with the colonizer’s wives, Bator’s protagonist Jadzia (as are other mothers) dreams of marrying her daughter off to a “good German from the *Eneref*” [NRF, Polish abbreviation for GDR, i.e. East Germany]; she quite literally wants him to possess her daughter so the privilege can rub off on the whole family (*PG* p. 181). The superior cultural and material status of Germany in Jadzia’s eyes ennoble the whole nation, to the extent she can ignore the crimes committed by members of that nation during the war, as Bator’s narrator observes ironically: “the Germans from ‘Otto’ belonged to a different breed than the Nazis, who during the last war decreased her family in the village of Zalesie by a dozen members”. Yet, in the same scene, Jadzia’s resentment toward Germans becomes apparent in her musings about the injustice of the greater wealth of those who “lost the war and murdered many people,” but now have supermarkets, “Otto” catalogues and canned drinks while the winners (the Poles) make cutlets from cheap sausage and breadcrumbs (*PG*, p. 187). Although imperialistic discourses of Germanness versus Slavness as embodying the dichotomy of civilization versus barbarism dates back to the eighteenth century, we need to consider the extent to which these imperialist perceptions of Slavs, imagined as “natural,” “emotional,” and “savage” have been internalized and

played out in various forms of social interaction between both nations, including dealing with, remembering and narrating the history of the expulsions and resettlement (Kopczyk, 2017). The above examples illustrate, and indeed should be read in relation to, the deeply ingrained imperialistic narratives of ethnic stereotypes, which produced the cultures considered superior (German) and inferior (Slavic) in the collective consciousness of these groups and how these narratives shape desires and emotional responses during different periods of Polish-German history.

5. Conclusion

In reckoning with the history of German forced displacement and resettlement in their literary texts, Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Bator can be seen to be addressing issues that arose around narration of the period: namely, the hostility and pervasive discourse of Germans as the perpetrators and the “enemy,” as dominant ways of representing Polish-German history through most of the twentieth century and beyond. The policing of history by the conservative and right-wing groups in Poland, who worry about Germany’s efforts to “whitewash its role in wartime atrocities,” seen in the recent example of the campaign to replace the word “Nazis” with “Germans” on the Polish World War II memorials (Tilles, 2021), testifies to a shortage of compassion to consider the loss and suffering of German local populations resulting from the postwar forced expulsions. Presented here writers, deal with it by employing the “tender narrator,” a narrative perspective where the objects and belongings left behind by German householders, dishes, cutlery or house decorations, now in possession of the Polish settlers, are brought to readers’ attention; thus bringing their forgotten history into light. The recovery of the personal stories of German things and their owners allows the writers to create a more empathetic version of the postwar population displacement, connecting Polish and German experiences. They also demonstrate how the past shadows the present, for example in the nostalgia trips of the Germans to their former homes in Poland. In that sense, the writers’ texts subscribe to a trend apparent in local, small-scale initiatives in western Poland, aimed at recovering and celebrating the previous German presence, their contributions and legacy in the Polish cities and towns, which the post-1945 Polish authorities had put so much effort into erasing while “Polonizing” the former German territories. “Looking at Breslau under the plaster” by T. Karpowicz Foundation, is one such initiative aimed at creating a map of public sites with German inscriptions originating from the pre-WWII era of Wrocław/Breslau.

The literary texts discussed here also explore the extent to which German farms, houses and household items, informed the new lives and new identities of the new Polish communities in Lower Silesia, a largely neglected subject, with one of the first studies analyzing the affective responses to the resettlement property and the changing meaning attached to these objects published in 2019 by Karolina Kuszyk. In the novels, published over a decade ago, the writers present a nuanced narrative about complex and ambiguous emotional environment that accompanied the process of the forced migration of Poles and Germans, enabled by the creative process of storytelling. They convey strangeness as the affect indicating the cognitive process of domesticating the new surroundings while building new life. In terms of representation of the topic, Tokarczuk and Bator are undisputed pioneers – over seventy years after the expulsions took place, an exhibition *Nieswojość* [Uncomfortableness/ Akwardness, 2020] was organized in the Polish border town Zgorzelec, a first exhibition of this kind, which showed photographs of the postwar “taming” of Lower Silesia by its new inhabitants, and the scars that appeared in the landscape as a result of the adaptation by settlers and displaced persons of a culturally alien space (Gadomska, 2020). The writers’ exploration of resentment, as evidenced for example in their take on the narrative of “recovered territories,” invites the considerations of a postcolonial/ post-socialist lens while interpreting the role and conditioning of the settlers’ attitudes towards German property. The deep roots of resentment and its long-lasting effects, suggest, we must investigate the past beyond the period of the Second World War and instead consider Poland’s long history of social, political and economic subjugation and imperialistic discourse of Slavs and Germans, which continues to shape Polish-German relations to this day.

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