

Joanna Sieracka

ORCID: 0009-0007-4167-7949

University of Wrocław

A cardboard revolution? The women's strikes placards and their very own lives

Abstract: This article is an analysis of the poetics of the women's strikes which took place in Poland in 2020 in response to the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal that tightened Polish abortion law by banning pregnancy termination due to fetal anomalies. My main focus is on cardboard placards made by the protesters and used at the demonstrations. Comparing them with the poetics of the black protests launched in 2016 as a response to a bill restricting Polish abortion law, I take as my starting point the recognition of the revolutionary character of the recent mobilization, emphatically showcased—as shown by my analysis and the findings of other scholars (e.g., P. Czaplinski and A. Graff)—in breaking with all the symbolic languages and the post-transition social contract, a gesture expressive of the rejection of the strategy of assimilation to the national-conservative hegemony. Analyzing multiple references to Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, magical thinking, and spell formulas in the poetics of the women's strikes, I highlight the significance of the carnivalization of the protests. I argue that thanks to it, new languages of reproductive rights emerged, alternative sources of community were evoked, and the slogans written on cardboard placards and banners and chanted during the demonstrations and marches created a relatively autonomous universe of their own. In conclusion, I seek to answer whether cardboard placards, if performatively used, can constitute cultural change and re-represent the values for which the protesters fight.

Keywords: the women's strikes, social mobilization, feminism in Poland, the poetics of protest, reproductive rights

Introduction

Staged in the autumn of 2020 as a reaction to the ruling of Poland's Constitutional Tribunal that tightened the country's already restrictive abortion law by banning pregnancy termination due to fetal anomalies, the women's strikes have been hailed by some as a “cardboard revolution.” This moniker refers to the material from which most placards carried by the protesters were made. Handmade placards with inscriptions and pictures, hastily scribbled on scraps of what happened to be at hand, became a distinctive feature of the protests. Although the term “cardboard revolution” points to the material aspects of the placards, it was

rather their “content”—drawings, photos, symbols, and in particular slogans, as well as the way they were interconnected—that made commentators think of them as revolutionary. Nevertheless, their material status, the process of production, and messages were all intertwined, which I will discuss in more detail later in this article.

The poetics of the women’s strikes and especially the banners and slogans used by the protesters have been widely commented ever since. The protesters’ explicit language, with “Wypierdalać” (i.e., “Fuck off” or “Get the fuck outta here”) being the main message of the movement, triggered much controversy in the media, among the political class, and both conservative and liberal commentators. Public opinion dwelled on the unprecedented creativity, intertextuality, and humor of most placards created by the strikers. They also invited considerable interest from linguists, resulting in plentiful linguistic analyses of the poetics of the women’s strikes published since the events.¹ The first collected volume on the women’s strikes was titled *Język rewolucji* [The Language of Revolution],² and not without reason, as their revolutionary nature was shown to have been linked to multiple discursive changes.

It is often argued that the poetics of the women’s strikes revealed the crisis of communication or even of democracy itself. According to Przemysław Czapliński, the poetics of the women’s strikes is a symptom of “the crisis of symbolic languages used so far to produce imagined majorities,” in particular of the liberal and the state-conservative-nationalistic languages.³ At the same time, it is a result of the protesters, especially young women, hitting the communication wall: “[N]obody listens to them, the words used by them prove inefficient, and the speech that reaches them seems to be foreign.”⁴ In a similar vein, Agnieszka Graff argues that the language of the women’s strikes “rejects all the previous languages.”⁵ Comparing the poetics of the black protests initiated in 2016 and that of the mobilization in 2020, Graff indicates a spectacular rupture in the continuity of the symbolic sphere wrought by the women’s strikes. Such a discursive breach was a result of a generational shift and an increasing social awareness of the total disgrace of the Catholic Church as an institution shaping Polish national

¹ See J. Antas, J. Pstrąg, “Kartonowe wojny słowne,” *Dialog* 2022, no. 2, <https://www.dialog-pismo.pl/w-numerach/kartonowe-wojny-slowne> (accessed: 16 August 2022); M. Ośliżko, “Memy wyszły na ulicę. Transkryptywny i multimodalny charakter transparentów Strajku Kobiet,” [in:] *Wokół strajków kobiet*, eds. E. Dziwak, K. Gheorghé, Kraków–Katowice–Łódź 2021, pp. 217–38; M. Kraus, “Rola humoru w realizacji podstawowej funkcji komunikacyjnej transparentów prezentowanych podczas Strajku Kobiet,” [in:] *Wokół strajków kobiet*, pp. 107–19; A. Głaz, “O języku protestu, ale inaczej,” *PAUza Akademicka* 2020, no. 553, p. 3; Z. Kloch, “Hasła Strajku Kobiet i języki wernakularne,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 113, 2022, no. 1, pp. 117–130.

² *Język rewolucji*, ed. P. Kosiewski, Warszawa 2021.

³ P. Czapliński, “Większość wyobrażona,” [in:] *Język rewolucji*, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵ A. Graff, “Gdzie się podziały ‘macie wyklęte’?,” [in:] *Język rewolucji*, p. 25.

identity.⁶ A “rejection of all the previous languages” can thus be understood not merely as a rhetorical change, but as a much deeper refusal to participate in a national identity sealed by the post-transition social contract⁷ and as a manifestation of readiness to lay new foundations for collective life.⁸

As a researcher interested in the contemporary herstory of the women's movement and feminist discourse in Poland, with a special focus on changes and continuities, I take Graff's and Czapliński's insights as my point of departure in this article. Their most important implications for my argument are as follows:

— the mobilization of 2016 and the women's strikes of 2020, though historically continuous and interrelated, should be perceived as two different movements, especially in terms of the dialectics of change and continuity and the discourses they reproduced or established;

— there is a significant discursive break between the two mobilizations; the women's strikes seem to have relinquished all the symbolic languages (including the poetics of the black protests of 2016) prevalent in Polish public debate;

— since this discursive break and the apparent revolutionary quality of the women's strikes are linked to crises in language or communication, the slogans chanted by the strikers and written on walls and sidewalks, speeches, performances, and especially cardboard placards are the most relevant source of knowledge about the revolution the women's strikes were supposed to bring.

In this article, I inquire whether what we numerously participated in was indeed a “cardboard revolution,” and if so, what social and cultural changes and what discursive breaks we witnessed. I also pose a far more difficult question: Can banners used by protesters gathering in public squares and streets perform a social and cultural change? To this aim, I analyze the poetics of the women's strikes, with a special focus on the cardboard placards brandished during the demonstrations that took place across Poland in 2020 and 2021. To grasp changes and continuities, I will compare it with the poetics of the black protests staged in 2016 as a response to a bill restricting Polish abortion law. To this aim, I will refer to an analysis of the rhetoric of the black protests I offered in “‘Strong, independent women who know their worth and shrug at the very idea of discrimination’: The black protest in the context of changing ideals of femininity in Poland,” which

⁶ A. Graff, “Jak ewoluowały symbole i hasła kobiecych protestów 2016–2020” [conference paper], International Conference *Rebellious People: Protests in 21st-Century Europe—Traditions, Goals, Ways of Self-Organization*, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, 8–10 November 2021, 1:56:28–2:16:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzG75xG5uLc> (accessed: 16 August 2022); A. Graff, “Coś w Polsce pękło, coś się wylało. Jak młodzi zerwali Wielki Kompromis z Kościołem,” OKO.press, 5 November 2020, <https://oko.press/jak-mlodzi-zerwali-wielki-kompromis-z-kosciolem-graff/> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

⁷ A. Graff, “Gdzie się podziały ‘macie wyklęte?’,” p. 25; A. Graff, “Coś w Polsce pękło, coś się wylało.”

⁸ P. Czapliński, *O nową umowę społeczną. Bunt październikowy 2020*, Warszawa 2021, pp. 23–24.

appeared in *Władza Sądzenia* in 2018.⁹ The photos of banners and placards I analyze or cite are available online. To paint a complete picture, I also draw on my observations resulting from active participation in a range of the black protests from 2016 to 2018 and the women's strikes in 2020 and 2021 in Warsaw: large marches, car demonstrations, and local street blockades.

A farewell to the strategy of assimilation

Like the women's strikes, the black protests have been hailed as a radical transformation of public debate and civil society¹⁰ and as the beginning of mass feminism in Poland.¹¹ However, as I argued in my paper from 2018, such a picture is one-sided. A narrative of continuity that I proposed instead of the prevalent story of change was based on the conclusion that the mobilization of 2016 proved successful because of the strategic reproduction of handy discourses entrenched in Polish culture: the traditional repertoire of powerful patriotic and national symbols, including gender-related ones, and the individualistic language of neoliberalism, developing in Polish public debate since the transition of 1989. In my view, this approach resulted from the protesters' main, albeit not necessarily conscious, strategy of attempting to assimilate to the mainstream public debate in order to garner acceptance for the mobilization and its goals.

From this perspective, an abrupt breakdown of the social contract and the protesters' refusal to engage in dialogue that we witnessed in 2020 can be interpreted as a sign of the rejection of that assimilation strategy. This could be linked both to the undemocratic ways that the power-holders used to restrict abortion law and to the pandemic crisis.

The ban on abortion in cases of fetal anomalies was introduced through the back door, via the ruling of the politically compromised Constitutional Tribunal, and not as a result of parliamentary debate. Thus, to many protesters, it meant

⁹ J. Sieracka, "'Strong, independent women who know their worth and shrug at the very idea of discrimination': The black protest in the context of changing ideals of femininity in Poland," *Władza Sądzenia* 2018, no. 14, pp. 14–29 (accessed: 16 August 2022).

¹⁰ See mo, "Strajk kobiet zmienia historię. Nieprzebrane tłumy w Warszawie [ZOBACZ]," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 3 October 2020, https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,20784177,tak-wyglada-czarnyponiedzialek-wideo-i-zdjecia.html?fbclid=IwAR1xtGyUm3U_1T72Iz2WDxrt0H-2NMX9Ww0Lf3Ju3_frYhCzM4JenehP_U (accessed: 16 August 2022); Faceci w czerni z *Gazety Wyborczej*, "Rewolucja parasolek, rewolucja zwykłych Polek," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4 October 2020, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75968,20786259,rewolucja-parasolek-rewolucja-zwyklych-polek.html> (accessed: 16 August 2022); As, "No to mamy rewolucję. Czarny Poniedziałek to początek nowej epoki," TOK FM, 4 October 2016, <https://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,130517,20789413,no-to-mamy-rewolucje-czarny-poniedzialek-to-poczatek-nowej.html> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

¹¹ E. Majewska, *Tramwaj zwany uznaniem. Feminizm i solidarność po neoliberalizmie*, Warszawa 2017, p. 25.

a denial of democracy and an attempt to avoid confrontation with society. The decision affecting the lives of many was entrusted to a body whose independence and impartiality was (and still is) highly questionable and that by definition lacks direct citizen legitimacy.¹² Furthermore, it was made and announced amidst the global pandemic crisis, which many citizens believed to have revealed an unprecedented scale of the inefficiency of the state. In the second half of 2020, the public's evaluation of the government's response to the pandemic was steadily becoming worse.¹³ The year 2020 also saw a rapid growth in the percentage of Poles who felt ignored by the government, which may have been caused by their assessment of both the authorities' response to the pandemic and the tightening of abortion law.¹⁴

Having faced a breakdown of the post-transition social contract and as well as a crisis of public debate and democracy, the protesters gave up on dialogue or attempts to fit in and become accepted by the national-conservative mainstream. Their dismissal of the assimilation strategy was most unabashedly manifested in the main message of the mobilization: "Fuck off" (or "Get the fuck outta here"). As one of the most popular slogans, the word was repeatedly chanted by the protesters all over the country, inscribed on their banners and placards, and written on walls and sidewalks.

As Kornelia Sobczak puts it: "If I were to say what the invigorating freshness of the current protests is about [...], it is not their 'vulgarity,' 'aggressiveness,' or 'intransigence,' but their wonderful, so to speak, *désintéressement* in what the Authorities, both those adversary and those allied, have to say about them."¹⁵ The voice of the authorities ceased to be a point of reference. Carrying banners urging them to "fuck off," the protesters situated themselves as a counter-public, as a community of the marginalized, who did not seek to be legitimized by the center.¹⁶

Graff, Czaplinski, and Magda Szcześniak have noticed another sign of the eschewal of the assimilation strategy by the participants in the women's strikes; specifically, they rejected "heroic traditions"¹⁷ with their symbolically-thick language, replete with the rhetoric of dignity and references to patriotic or national-

¹² A. Bodnar, "Narasta dramat kobiet. Oświadczenie RPO Adama Bodnara," Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej RPO, 23 October 2020, <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/aborcja-oswiadczenie-rpo-narasta-dramat-kobiet> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

¹³ CBOS, "Komunikat z badań: Obawy przed zarażeniem koronawirusem i postrzeganie działań rządu," Warszawa 2020, p. 2, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2020/K_141_20.PDF (accessed: 18 July 2022).

¹⁴ CBOS, "Komunikat z badań: Samopoczucie Polaków w roku 2020," Warszawa 2021, p. 2, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K_001_21.PDF (accessed: 18 July 2022).

¹⁵ K. Sobczak, "Słowa i ciała," *Dialog*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.dialog-pismo.pl/przedstawienia/slowa-i-ciala> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

¹⁶ M. Szcześniak, "Koniec dziadocenu," [in:] *Język rewolucji*, p. 102.

¹⁷ P. Czaplinski, *O nową umowę społeczną*, p. 23.

istic discourses.¹⁸ As several authors indicate,¹⁹ the latter poetics had been dominant during the black protests. Back then, the protesters' reliance on patriotic imagery was manifested by making the black color one of the most powerful symbols of their mobilization. Women and their allies posted photos of themselves wearing black on social media, and those pictures quickly conquered the internet as a part of the #blackprotest campaign. Protesters were also dressed in black during the street demonstrations. According to Elżbieta Korolczuk, the color quickly became a cultural meme, "not only flexible and easily personalized, but also emotionally alluring and having rich histories of social transmission."²⁰ Its emotional appeal and symbolic power came from the embeddedness and deep significance of the black color in local culture. The choice of color referred to the nineteenth-century tradition of Polish women wearing black in order to mourn the country's partition and loss of sovereignty.²¹

The prevalence of black both in the social-media #blackprotest campaign and during the street demonstrations was not the only way to invoke—and at the same time renegotiate—nationalistic and martyrdom-evoking imagery. Many slogans, for instance "Polish Mother—incubator, if she miscarries—prosecutor" ("Matka Polka — inkubator, jak poroni — prokurator"), directly referenced the myth of the Polish Mother. Promoted in the nineteenth century, this vision inseparably linked femininity to motherhood. This tradition defined women as both biological and symbolic bearers of national identity, as heroines "who carried the future of the nation on their shoulders"²² and were thus supposed to sacrifice themselves and subordinate their needs and aspirations to the needs of family and nation.

The figure of the Polish Mother was more or less explicitly evoked in many well-known symbols and slogans associated with the times of foreign occupation, national independence uprisings, and, more generally, the struggle for sovereign statehood and self-sacrifice for the nation. According to Korolczuk, such slogans were usually "altered in order to stress the gendered character of the fight against abortion ban"²³:

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 23; M. Szcześniak, "Koniec dziadocenu"; A. Graff, "Jak ewoluowały symbole i hasła kobiecych protestów 2016–2020."

¹⁹ A. Zawadzka, "Czarny Protest i płeć," *Zadra* 2016, no. 3–4, pp. 5–9; E. Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland: The power of connective action," *Zoon Politikon* 7, 2016, pp. 91–113; J. Sieracka, "'Strong, independent women who know their worth and shrug at the very idea of discrimination';" A. Graff, "Claiming the shipyard, the cowboy hat, and the anchor for women: Polish feminism's dialogue and struggle with national symbolism," *East European Politics and Societies* 33, 2019, no. 2, pp. 472–496; A. Graff, "Gdzie się podziały 'macice wyklęte'"; A. Graff, "Jak ewoluowały symbole i hasła kobiecych protestów 2016–2020."

²⁰ E. Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland," p. 103.

²¹ Ibid.

²² M. Reimann, "Searching for egalitarian divisions of care: Polish couples at the life-course transition to parenthood," [in:] *Couples' Transitions to Parenthood: Analysing Gender and Work in Europe*, eds. G. Grunow, M. Evertsson, Cheltenham–Northampton 2016, p. 222.

²³ E. Korolczuk, "Explaining mass protests against abortion ban in Poland," p. 104.

Popular were banners and pins with letter “P” inscribed in an anchor, which is a popular symbol of the Home Army and the 1944 Warsaw Uprising known as Fighting Poland, but with added woman’s breasts and a braid to signify the gendered nature of women’s mobilization. Some participants also displayed slogan “Fighting Polish Woman” (Polka Walcząca), “Independent Polish woman” (Polka niepodległa) or the words of the Polish national anthem “Poland has not yet perished” (Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła), replacing the word “Poland” with “Polka” signifying a female Polish citizen.²⁴

References to national symbols and the ideal of woman as a martyr in the poetics of the black protests were used as a creative method for elevating women’s reproductive rights and gendering national imagery. Even though they expressed pathos or irony, even though they were used as a subversive joke or as an “appropriation of national imagery expressing the desire to be recognized as legitimate participants in the patriotic tradition,”²⁵ they in fact confirmed that the protesting women, as Graff argues, situated themselves as belonging to the national community—betrayed by it, but still remaining its part and hoping to be heard.²⁶ The symbolically-thick patriotic language also had a pragmatic function, as recalling representations of the nation’s common historical struggles made it easier to mobilize women and spark a sense of community and solidarity.

Although I agree with Graff’s and Szcześniak’s view that the poetics of this kind was not prevalent during the women’s strikes, which can be regarded as a symptom of discursive and generational change, I noted several interesting cases of drawing from the repertoire of national myths and symbols in the 2020 mobilization. However, these references were not only limited, but also geared to a very different function; namely, they were no longer used in order to assimilate to the hegemonic culture. In my view, what they manifested was rather the carnivalization of the women’s strikes.

Issued amidst the pandemic crisis, the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal that banned abortion in cases of fetal anomalies caused a moral shock in a vast part of society, broke the social contract, and breached the so-called abortion compromise. As a consequence, communication between polarized social groups was severed, and the existing structure was abandoned, which resulted in a transition to liminality, based on ambiguity, a reversal of meanings, and the suspension of the status quo. As Maciej Kowalewski argues: “When politics becomes its own caricature, a mockery, a travesty of democracy, the carnivalization of the protest is an expression of a desire to regain joy, to become liberated from the bitter grotesque of a toxic political-economic order.”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ A. Graff, “Claiming the shipyard, the cowboy hat, and the anchor for women,” p. 492. Graff argues that the poetics of the black protests, as emerging in the context of *communitas*, a liminal stage of social drama, exceeded this binary opposition. See *ibid.*, pp. 486–93.

²⁶ A. Graff, “Jak ewoluowały symbole i hasła kobiecych protestów 2016–2020.”

²⁷ M. Kowalewski, “Karnawalizacja protestu,” *Stan Rzeczy* 2014, no. 2, p. 212.

The liminal phase generates unique feelings of solidarity and mutuality and integrates people around the shared experience.²⁸ Such an experience exhibits the features of revolutionary festivity,²⁹ such as utopian freedom, equality, and empowerment—“even if, and especially if, it [is] expressed via blatant moral, aesthetic or interpersonal transgression where dominant morals and values [are] flaunted, inverted and reversed”³⁰—and is characterized by a corporeal surplus that disrupts the automatism of verbal communication.³¹ It appears “as a kind of excess: reaching beyond the self and transcending it for the sake of communality, even if the emerging community should be ephemeral, unfinished, indefinite, merely potential.”³²

The carnivalization of the women’s strikes

The perspective of carnivalization of the protests helps grasp the meaning—or, perhaps, rather the function—of the rare instances of the deployment of patriotic myths, symbols, and discourses by the participants in the women’s strikes. In particular, it helps understand why Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (*The Forefathers’ Eve*), which is considered the Polish national drama but had barely been referred to during the black protests, became one of the most popular sources of intertextual references in 2020.

Celebrated as a cornerstone of Polish Romantic mythology, Mickiewicz’s work addresses “the historical trauma of Poland’s loss of independence.”³³ The eponymous ritual—Forefathers’ Eve—is “semi-Christian on the surface, but in fact, it comes from a much older, pagan heritage.”³⁴ The word *dziady* denotes both the spirits of the ancestors and a collection of rites, rituals, and customs that were dedicated to them. As the cultural anthropologist and writer Wojciech Zembaty explains, “[t]he very word *dziady* is strange; it’s a folk, informal word, it means offering to the ancestors, but it also means ‘beggars’ and the adjective *dziadowski* means poor and shabby. The summoned ancestors’ souls do resemble beggars, because they are hungry and they beg for attention and food.”³⁵

²⁸ A. Ostaszewska, “Czarne protesty. Doświadczenia społeczne jako podstawa *communitas* kobiet,” *Pedagogika Społeczna* 16, 2017, no. 4, p. 128.

²⁹ D. Sajewska, “Cieleśna rewolucja i nietożsamość,” [in:] *Język rewolucji*, p. 86.

³⁰ L. Langman, “The carnivalization of the public sphere,” [in:] *Re-Imagining Public Space: The Frankfurt School in the 21st Century*, eds. D. Boros, J.M. Glass, New York 2014, p. 197.

³¹ D. Sajewska, “Cieleśna rewolucja i nietożsamość,” p. 87.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³³ W. Zembaty, “Forefathers’ Eve—Adam Mickiewicz,” Culture.pl, <https://culture.pl/en/work/forefathers-eve-adam-mickiewicz> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Multiple references to Mickiewicz's poetic drama during the women's strikes reflected their generational character, not only because *Dziady* is on top of the mandatory reading list for high schools, but also because most allusions appeared to be based on the wordplay between *dziady* and *dziadersi*. A *dziaders* quickly became the figure embodying the chief enemy of the strikers: those responsible for Poland's conservative social order and hostile—or rather patronizing, belittling, and mansplaining—to both women and young people. As Magdalena Muszel and Grzegorz Piotrowski put it, the country's deep generational divides, reflected in the women's strikes,

[have] been articulated by a new, derogative catchphrase for the older generation—*dziaders*. There's no direct English translation, but it echoes the mocking Generation Z jibe, “OK boomer.” The term encapsulates not only a rejection of the previous generation's approach to politics, but also their moral authority and patriarchal values. This includes a rejection of the Polish Catholic church, which has been a target of the protests for its anti-abortion lobbying.³⁶

One of the most spectacular references to Mickiewicz's poetic drama was a performance of *Dziady* put on by the strikers in front of the house of Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the ruling Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), which politically controls the Constitutional Tribunal. Kaczyński was one of the protesters' greatest “enemies,” blamed for the restriction of abortion law. The timing of the Tribunal's ruling and the staging of the protests made it possible to hold the event on 31 October, which was exactly when, according to tradition, the feast of Dziady was celebrated in the days of yore. Kaczyński's house, in whose vicinity many demonstrations took place, was located in Adam Mickiewicz Street. Thanks to such significant, if serendipitous, coincidences and the attractive wordplay easily grasped by all Polish speakers, the performance could be perceived not only as a staging of the play, but also as the carrying out of the Dziady ritual, which resulted in an actual dismissal of *dziady* (i.e., *dziadersi*, and especially Kaczyński, whom many protesters deemed the first *dziaders* of Poland). Such an understanding was based on the double meaning of the verb *odprawić*, which can be translated as both “to perform in a celebratory manner” and “to dismiss.” This equivocation was perfectly illustrated by a girl carrying a cardboard placard that read: “Przyszłam tu odprawić dziady,” by which she declared that she had come there both to celebrate a ritual called Dziady and to dismiss *dziady* (i.e., *dziadersi*).

³⁶ M. Muszel, G. Piotrowski, “‘They’re uncompromising’: How the young transformed Poland’s abortion protests,” openDemocracy, 11 December 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/theyre-uncompromising-how-the-young-transformed-polands-abortion-protests/> (accessed: 16 August 2022). The 2019 Pew survey found religiosity in Poland to be declining faster than in any other country, particularly among the young. See Ch. Tamir, A. Connaughton, A.M. Salazar, *The Global God Divide: People’s Thoughts on Whether Belief in God is Necessary to be Moral Vary by Economic Development, Education and Age*, Pew Research Center, 20 July 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/07/PG_2020.07.20_Global-Religion_FINAL.pdf (accessed: 16 August 2022).

The protesters' idea to draw on the national drama was based to some extent on its meaning and importance in Polish national imagery, resulting from the history of its stage productions. For instance, after a Warsaw production of *Dziady* was banned by the government in 1968, it became a symbol of resistance against the Polish People's Republic and oppressive power in general. The most important stage productions of the play accompanied the most important events in Polish history, moments of crisis and transformation. Mickiewicz's drama has resonated most fully when performed. According to Dariusz Kosiński, "irreducible to and inexpressible in words, [it is] a script that must be enacted and that takes effect and is performed whenever the community's existence is jeopardized by a deep and fundamental crisis."³⁷ Most importantly, stage productions of *Dziady* do not just passively comment on social reality, but rather performatively establish it: "Adam Mickiewicz inscribed into *Dziady* the idea of theater understood as an act happening here and now, making real impact on reality through the audience."³⁸

It seems that the protesters did not evoke *Dziady* as a source of national mythology and hegemonic national identity, but rather tapped into its performative—and transformative—power. By performing Mickiewicz's drama, celebrating *Dziady*, and dismissing *dziadersi* through performances, placards, and slogans, the protesters attempted to make real change and establish a new reality. This was perfectly captured by the slogan "Przyszłam tu odprawić dziady," cited above. The person who coined it did not merely express her urge to get rid of *dziadersi*, but—by carrying the placard and gathering with other women and their allies in a public place—she actually performed the ritual, establishing the future for which she wanted to fight. Such a performative power can also be attributed to the placard with a slogan reading "Umarł Gustaw, narodził się Konrad" ("Gustaw is dead, Konrad has been born"), which was not just an intertextual reference to the transformation of the protagonist in *Dziady*, but rather an actualization of a social metamorphosis, a performative gesture of repudiating the passiveness of Polish society and embracing active citizenship and political empowerment.

The performative power of such gestures and the protesters' agency were rooted in magical thinking. In the situation of liminality, which resulted in the suspension of norms and rules and the rejection of communication based on phallogocentric values, efficiency was gained by "taboo spheres, sanctioned by what can colloquially be called mysterious powers, supernatural phenomena situated outside the norm and the visible world order."³⁹ This was where multiple references to magical thinking came from, marginalized by the hegemonic culture and traditionally associated with femininity, pre-Christian rituals, and alternative roots of the community.

³⁷ D. Kosiński, "Życie dzielimy z umarłymi," *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2016, no. 44, p. 14.

³⁸ D. Kosiński, *Polski teatr przemiany*, Wrocław 2007, p. 73.

³⁹ R. Sulima, *Powidoki codzienności. Obyczajowość Polaków na progu XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2022, p. 362.

This is also why *Dziady* proved one of the most inspiring and creativity-boosting cultural resources. Although Mickiewicz's drama has served as fertile soil for Romantic messianism and the cult of martyrdom, key to the construction of Polish hegemonic national identity, it in fact evokes, and quite overtly too, Slavic mythology and pre-Christian sources of national community. It also embodies the logic of festivity and carnival, which pulls its readers and performers into "a circle of Dionysian collective effusion, [...] a quasi-ritualistic ecstatic experience, a dancing vortex."⁴⁰

Magical thinking can be identified not only in references to *Dziady*; it manifested during the women's strikes in many other ways as well. What was conspicuous in their poetics was casting a spell on reality on a tremendous scale. Such conjuration was perhaps most blatantly expressed in the main slogan of the protests. Chanting "fuck off" and carrying placards with this inscription can be interpreted as cursing somebody. As Zbigniew Kloch argues, "curse can be considered a speech act aimed to cause changes in reality by the agential power of the word. It is therefore a perlocutionary act, which is supposed to cast spells, scare, cause health effects—punish the person concerned."⁴¹

The idea of the performative power of words underlay many other slogans that appeared on the protesters' cardboard placards. Many of them precisely repeated the spell formula: "May your cat shit your bed" ("A żeby kot ci się w łóżku zesrał"), "Hope you step on a Lego block, dick" ("Obyś chuju wdepnął w lego"), and "May Sasin organize your Christmas Eve" ("Oby wam Sasin Wigilię zorganizował")⁴². The linguists Jolanta Antas and Jakub Pstrąg single out the slogan "If we may not allay your pain, be off into the night again. A-huss! A-huss!"⁴³ ("Gdy nic tobie nie pomoże, idźże sobie precz, nieboże. A kysz! A kysz!") as "a classic example of wishful thinking, connected with the use of a magical word." A direct quotation from *Dziady*, the line, they insist, served as a spell to drive away the bad spirits, which were in this case equated with the government.⁴⁴

Another instance of invoking magic and taboo spheres at the women's strikes involved taking over the archetype of the witch. Although the witch has been

⁴⁰ D. Kosiński, "Życie dzielimy z umarłymi," p. 15.

⁴¹ Z. Kloch, "Hasła Strajku Kobiet i języki wernakularne," p. 127.

⁴² The slogan refers to Jacek Sasin, a minister in the Law and Justice government. He is broadly believed to be responsible for squandering 70 million PLN on the so-called envelope election (the presidential election by mail amid the pandemic, which was perceived as unlawful). Associated with a flagrant mismanagement of public funds, Sasin epitomizes the government's utter ineptitude in public opinion. The journalist Renata Grochal writes in a mainstream Polish newspaper: "They call him 'a reversed Midas' because everything he touches certainly does not turn into gold." R. Grochal, "Symbol partactwa PiS, czego się nie dotknie, ponosi porażkę. Dlaczego wpływy Jacka Sasina rosną?," *Newsweek*, 30 January 2022, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/jacek-sasin-czyli-prawa-reka-kaczynskiego-dlaczego-akcje-sasina-ida-w-gore/9phjt1n> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

⁴³ A. Mickiewicz, *The Forefathers' Eve*, transl. Ch.S. Kraszewski, London 2016, p. 160.

⁴⁴ J. Antas, J. Pstrąg, "Kartonowe wojny słowne."

a symbol of feminist resistance since the first suffragettes,⁴⁵ in Poland it started to gain popularity after the black protests, with the climax during the women's strikes. The strikers often identified with the witch figure, using placards with a range of slogans such as: "Witches to the streets" ("Czarownice na ulice"), "You will not burn us all" ("Wszystkich nas nie spalicie"), and "We are the witches, and these are our uteruses" ("My jesteśmy czarownice, a to nasze są macice").

Magic, astrology, and the archetype of the witch have recently experienced a renaissance on social media all over the world. As a result of "disappointment with male ways of exercising power"⁴⁶ and feminist strategies of resistance, they seem to have become a global generational trend. Its strong presence at the women's strikes on the one hand reflected the generational nature of the mobilizations and on the other inscribed them into the global context of fourth-wave feminism and resistance against illiberal anti-feminist populism. However, this was likely not the only reason for such a surging popularity of placards and slogans referring to magic, and in particular to the witch figure, during the protests launched in Poland in the autumn of 2020.

In my view, the popularity of this trend largely stemmed from the carnivalization of the protests, resulting from a deep crisis of public debate in Poland and the abrogation of the assimilation strategy by the protesters. While the protesters' attitude was informed by "disappointment with male ways of exercising power," it could not be reduced to passive resistance. Quite the contrary, the participants in the women's strikes attempted to create, if only temporarily, a counter-public or *communitas* based on the disavowal of the existing power relations. This attempt was performed, among other methods, through their self-identification with the figure of the witch, followed by evoking non-phallogocentric knowledges founded on magical thinking, folk beliefs, experience, intuition, and an intimate relationship with nature—knowledges traditionally associated with femininity and excluded from the public sphere.

Identifying themselves with the witch figure, the strikers subverted a negative tag used for decades by the right-wing media to label feminists.⁴⁷ Proudly parading this archetype, the protesters stirred associations with awe-inspiring female agency. They also restored grassroots, non-systemic methods of problem-

⁴⁵ In *Woman, Church and State* (1893), Matilda Joslyn Gage, an American suffragette and abolitionist, presented a feminist interpretation of witch-hunting. The figure of the witch, recast as a symbol of female empowerment and independence, experienced increased popularity in second-wave feminism.

⁴⁶ Z. Krawiec, "Jesteśmy wnuczkami czarownic, których nie zdołaliście spalić," *Magazyn Szum*, 6 March 2020, <https://magazynszum.pl/jestesmy-wnuczkami-czarownic-ktorych-nie-zdolaliscie-spalic/> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

⁴⁷ M. Samorek, S.W. Wojciechowska, "Wiedzmy, czarownice i protesty. Analiza etnograficzna treści," *Strajk Kobiet. Archiwum etnograficzno-folklorystyczne*, 9 July 2021, https://folklorstrajku.kobiet.blogspot.com/2021/07/wiedzmy-czarownice-i-protesty-analiza.html#_ftn2 (accessed: 16 August 2022).

solving that tend to be cultivated in female-only communities, cannot be tamed, disciplined, or controlled, and bring to mind contemporary practices of self-managed home abortions, which usually happen without medical supervision, but with support from grassroots abortion-access groups, massively promoted at the women's strikes.

I believe that the huge popularity of the witch figure at the women's strikes was also connected with an unprecedented recognition of the Catholic Church as hostile to women's rights. As Marta Samorek and Sara W. Wojciechowska argue, "[r]ight-wing journalists link witches' folklore and the protests themselves to heresy and satanism and perceive them as a threat to the Catholic Church."⁴⁸ Situating the Church as one of the main enemies of the women's strikes helped refer to the continuity of its history as a fierce opponent of female agency and empowerment in order to emphasize a resemblance—or rather a continuity—between the fate of witches, who were persecuted, tortured and burned at the stake, and the situation of women in contemporary Poland. This was perfectly illustrated by the slogan "We are the granddaughters of the witches you failed to burn" ("Jesteśmy wnuczkami czarownic, których nie zdołaliście spalić"), which often appeared on the placards held by the strikers.

Given this context, the references to *Dziady* in the poetics of the women's strikes cannot be perceived as continuing on the symbolically-thick language of the black protests with its attempted assimilation to the hegemonic national community and its efforts to legitimize resistance through time-honored patriotic symbols. On the contrary, these references conveyed a revolt against the Catholic, martyrdom-focused model of the national community, rather than a reproduction of it. Furthermore, they were also an expression of the carnivalization of the women's strikes and a provincialized, local manifestation of the post-secular turn, characterized by a growing interest in magic, folk spirituality, astrology, and the archetype of the witch as a strategy of feminist resistance.

Cardboard placards musealized

In analyzing banners and placards from the women's strikes of 2020, most commentators focus on an unprecedented ingenuity of slogans. According to Kosiński, "[i]t was the amazing creativity of the protesters, who invented series of subversive jokes, linguistic wordplays, ironic takeovers, and painfully accurate unmaskings on their pieces of cardboard, that powered the protests and made them recognizable and popular (also as a spectacle watched with curiosity as in 'what's new?')."⁴⁹ Edwin Bendyk associates this resourcefulness with "the mul-

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ D. Kosiński, "Prześmiewczość, performatywność, profanacja," [in:] *Język rewolucji*, p. 61.

tiplicity and complexity of the process of defining the protesters' subjectivity."⁵⁰ Franciszek Sterczewski mentions "amazing creativity and the sense of humor, which are the best tools for combating the absurdity of power-wielders and authoritarianism."⁵¹ Antas and Pstrąg emphasize "the linguistic, cultural, social, and historical awareness of the youth on one hand, and their ability to creatively use the potential of language and to play with [linguistic] domains on the other."⁵²

The unprecedented creativity of the protesters can be connected with the generational nature of the women's strikes and, consequently, with their reliance on social media. Several authors have observed that "memes took to the streets"⁵³ during the protests. Multiple placards had the form of Internet memes, transferring the digital communication genre typical of contemporary online folklore into real space.⁵⁴ Iwona Kurz argues that the most popular placard type, made of a piece of cardboard (a template) and an individualized slogan, strikingly resembled the structure of Internet memes.⁵⁵ With their open, flexible, and resource-economical formula, memes can be made by anyone, open up space for individual expression, and encourage creativity. Muszel explains the connection between the meme-like poetics of the women's strikes and creativity in a slightly different way. According to her, the protesters included many young people, who were "not only recipients but also creators of memes, who count[ed] on their popularity." That is why the placards expressed "full, creative freedom."⁵⁶

This inventiveness was also fueled by the rejection of the assimilation strategy and by the carnivalization of the protests. The latter, characterized by the repudiation of the norms and rules of everyday life, the suspension of meaning, and disruptions in the automatism of verbal communication, boosted ingenuity, triggered the creation of new meanings, and encouraged unrestrained experiments with language.

⁵⁰ E. Bendyk, "Podmiot i orzeczenie — gramatyka protestów," [in:] *Język rewolucji*, p. 8.

⁵¹ F. Sterczewski, "Trwające protesty są wymierzone w dotychczasowe schematy," [in:] *Język rewolucji*, p. 115.

⁵² J. Antas, J. Pstrąg, "Kartonowe wojny słowne."

⁵³ M. Oślizło, "Memy wyszły na ulicę. Transkryptywny i multimodalny charakter transparentów Strajku Kobiet," [in:] *Wokół strajków kobiet*, pp. 217–38; B. Zasięczny, "Państwo z kartonu, czyli o transparentach na jesiennych strajkach kobiet," *Wyjatek* 2020, no. 11, p. 9; I. Kurz, "Trzecie wyjście na ulicę," [in:] *Język rewolucji*, pp. 51–6.

⁵⁴ M. Oślizło, "Memy weszły na ulicę," p. 218.

⁵⁵ I. Kurz, "Media protestu: między kartonem a Insta (jesień 2020 w Polsce)" [conference paper], International Conference *Rebellious People: Protests in 21st-Century Europe—Traditions, Goals, Ways of Self-Organization*, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, 8–10 November 2021, 0:12:57–0:32:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzG75xG5uLc> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

⁵⁶ T. Chudzyński, "Kartony wykończyły nawet Hanke Mostowiak. Hasła strajku kobiet, czyli szyfr przeciw dziadersom," *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 6 November 2020, <https://dziennikbaaltycki.pl/kartony-wykonczyly-nawet-hanke-mostowiak-hasla-strajku-kobiet-czyli-szyfr-przeciw-dziadersom/ar/c1-15276522> (accessed: 20 August 2022). The English translation quoted from M. Muszel, G. Piotrowski, "'They're uncompromising.'"

This liminal burst of creativity resulted in an artistic redundancy that extended far beyond the communicative functionality of the banners, slogans, cardboard placards, and images produced by the protesters: they were all much more than “pure” messages. The creativity and artistic redundancy inherent in the poetics of the women’s strikes have been recognized by the world of art. The unprecedented proliferation of attempts to document the protests, archive their poetics, and collect their most ephemeral manifestations—briefly, a new trend to musealize the women’s mobilization—resulted in giving multiple placards a new life in museum archives, artistic installations, and at exhibitions.

According to Katarzyna Maniak, this new tendency ensued not only from the recognition of the groundbreaking quality of the women’s strikes, with the placards, slogans, performances, and other visuals that made up their poetics, but also from transformations in the very institution of the museum. “The unsealing of the institution,” as Maniak defines it, has come to pass in collaboration with audiences in three areas: a new paradigm of engagement, collecting the contemporary, and the focus on conflict. These practices have combined to undermine the traditional definition of the museum as neutral, past-oriented, and attached to the idea of social cohesion.⁵⁷

One institution to musealize the women’s strikes is the Museum of Gdańsk, which started collecting the “protest memorabilia” by inviting the protesters to bring their banners, photos, and recordings to the museum. The Museum’s website professes that “the more ‘witnesses of history’ are saved, the more stories about us our descendants will be able to tell through them.”⁵⁸ The Museum of Kraków has launched a similar collection.⁵⁹ Krzysztof Haczewski, the Museum’s spokesman, explains its purpose as follows: “We want those who will investigate and tell the history of Kraków in the future to have resources and materials for their practice. Unless we collect them now, especially when it comes to such ephemeral objects as cardboard placards, we will have none fifty years from now.”⁶⁰

As Maniak notes, these two institutions explicitly claimed a neutral approach, disowned any political engagement, and rather focused on collecting the contemporary and documenting the current life of the city through objects. In this approach, the placards are perceived as witnesses of urban history and bearers of historical value of great importance to the future generations. Maniak aptly observes that “[a]lthough the collecting is carried out with a view to the future, the contem-

⁵⁷ K. Maniak, “Muzealizacja protestu: rozszczelnienie instytucji,” *Elementy* 2021, no. 1, p. 31.

⁵⁸ “Jak przekazać swoje transparenty, zdjęcia i filmy do Muzeum Gdańska?,” Muzeum Gdańska, <https://muzeumgdansk.pl/wydarzenia/szczegoly/news/strajk-kobiet/> (accessed: 14 August 2022).

⁵⁹ Muzeum Krakowa, Facebook, 2 November 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/muzeumkrakowa/posts/10158044770123495> (accessed: 21 August 2022).

⁶⁰ A. Piątkowska, “Muzeum Krakowa gromadzi transparenty Strajku Kobiet. Pojawiły się już pierwsze kontrowersje,” *Kraków Nasze Miasto*, 12 November 2020, <https://krakow.naszemiasto.pl/muzeum-krakowa-gromadzi-transparenty-strajku-kobiet/ar/c13-7994057> (accessed: 21 August 2022).

porary is imagined from the perspective of the future retrospective.⁶¹ Such musealization entails a risk of disarming the political potential of the objects collected: “Historicizing the events and collecting the memorabilia that are supposed to document them can interfere with thinking of them as ongoing and expanding.”⁶²

Although these concerns have proven well-founded in several cases, there are a few practices of musealization where the institutional frames have enhanced the voices of the strikers and the immense influence of the poetics of the women’s strikes. On the night of 10 October 2020, when the biggest street demonstration, known as the March on Warsaw, took place, a group of students of Warsaw’s Academy of Fine Arts put up an installation in public space called *Las Transparentów* [The Forest of Placards]. They called on everyone to contribute to it by bringing their own placard: “Do not throw your placard into a trash can! Let it resonate in public space!”⁶³ In my view, amassing so many placards in one place and creating an organic-like installation gave the impression of multitude and evoked associations with the organic-like character of the protesting crowds.⁶⁴ The installation was arranged nearby the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, which, though not involved in its organization, accepted it as its neighbor. Unlike the collections launched by the museums of Gdańsk and Kraków, this initiative was not based on the perception of the placards as museum exhibits or historical resources for the future generations. What was emphasized was their political message, rather than their historical value.

A similar approach can be traced in *You’ll Never Walk Alone*, “an exhibition-manifesto of solidarity with women who took to the streets after the ruling issued on 22nd October 2020 by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal led by Julia Przyłębska,” which was held at Galeria Labirynt in Lublin. The exhibition put on display not only works of art “that are in solidarity with the All-Poland Women’s Strike,”⁶⁵ photos, and recordings documenting the protests, but also objects used

⁶¹ K. Maniak, “Muzealizacja protestu: rozszczelnienie instytucji,” p. 38.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶³ An excerpt from the description of the event posted on Facebook: “Po piątkowej demonstracji — Tworzymy Las Transparentów przed MSN!” Facebook, 29 October 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/events/muzeum-sztuki-nowoczesnej-w-warszawie-museum-of-modern-art-in-warsaw/po-piatakowej-demonstracji-tworzymy-las-transparentow-przed-msn/273706550639746/> (accessed: 14 August 2022).

⁶⁴ According to Kurz, the structure of the protesting crowds was based on the model of a swarm: “this metaphor describes the situation of equality of the subjects, when everyone is replaceable by everyone else, but at the same time, at any moment one’s special/unique competencies and skills can be implemented [...]. Using resources ‘at hand,’ collectivity, the horizontal arrangement of relations—these are the key potentially positive components of this system.” I. Kurz, “Trzecie wyjście na ulice,” p. 54.

⁶⁵ “You’ll Never Walk Alone” [exhibition description], 13 November 2020–16 May 2021, Galeria Labirynt, <https://labirynt.com/2021/02/18/youll-never-walk-alone-exhibition/?lang=en> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

during the women's strikes and brought to the gallery by ordinary people, such as banners, posters, and a protester toolkit, including eye drops to get rid of pepper spray. Expressing solidarity with the protesters, the title of the show, its description, and the invitation to the audience to create their own works in the gallery's dedicated space called the Open Studio of Banners, in this way both contributing to the exhibition and supporting the women's strikes, spoke to the political engagement of the event as a whole.

As Maniak argues, *The Forest of Placards* in Warsaw and *You'll Never Walk Alone* at Galeria Labirynt (especially the Open Studio of Banners) both unfolded in a relational space between the museum and public space and mobilized their audiences to replicate the slogans of resistance. As such, they did not suppress affective reactions, but rather accumulated and redirected them into action.⁶⁶ In my interpretation, the main goal of these two projects was not to archive the placards, but to amplify their political message. They aimed to prolong the life of placards, which usually lasts a mere couple of hours, and, through this, to prolong the presence of the signs of the ephemeral street protest and let them resonate in public space (or in the space of a public art gallery) longer than thousands of human bodies are capable of when gathering in one place and time and demonstrating on the streets.

Cardboard placards living lives of their own

Enjoying the typically liminal suspension of norms, rules, and meanings and forgoing any attempts to sway anyone to their cause or find legitimation in the hegemonic national-conservative discourse, the protesters fashioned a poetics that started to live a life of its own. The slogans written on placards and banners and chanted during the demonstrations and marches gave rise to their own relatively autonomous universe. They interacted with each other, formed series, and responded in real time to the public debate on the women's strikes and their poetics.

What drew several commentators' attention and set the 2020 social mobilization apart from the black protests was the ubiquity of simple placards made from humble pieces of cardboard, which quickly became a distinctive feature of the women's strikes. The minimal effort put in the production of a placard (other than inventing the slogan, which often required creativity, competence, and talent) and their very basic quality conveyed a sense of haste and urgency to physically join the strikes. This also reflected the pandemic circumstances and the grassroots, impromptu nature of the women's strikes. The pandemic restrictions prevented people from assembling to develop placards together, obtaining high-quality materials, or making large-size banners to be carried by several people. Because the

⁶⁶ K. Maniak, "Muzealizacja protestu: rozszczelnienie instytucji," p. 36.

demonstrations were not planned much in advance, the protesters produced their banners spontaneously and hurriedly, resorting to whatever materials were at hand.

Such conditions of the production of the placards and their material aspects influenced their meaning. Since many protesters were able to make new banners quickly and smoothly, they could invent new slogans for each demonstration, instantly responding to the current developments and the changing public debate.

This was one reason why many of the slogans were self-referential. Some of them thematized the very cardboard from which the placards were made: “Hey, cut this crap, I’m running out of cardboard” (“Weźcie przestańcie, kończą mi się kartony”), “You made me rob my cat of a cardboard box!” (“Przez was musiałam zabrać kotu karton”), “Dear Law and Justice party, I kindly remind you that Hanka Mostowiak was also finished off by cardboard” (“Drogi PiSie, serdecznie przypominam, że Hankę Mostowiak też wykończyły kartony”),⁶⁷ and “A few days more and we will run out of cardboard this country is made of” (“Jeszcze kilka dni i zabraknie kartonów, z których zrobione jest to państwo”).⁶⁸

Some slogans were coined in response to the criticism of the protesters’ expletive-laden language, especially of the main message of the movement and “Fuck PiS” (“Jebać PiS”), a popular phrase that circulated in multiple versions. The calls for more polite forms of protest were answered with “Shouldn’t have fucking pissed us off” (“Trzeba było nas nie wkurwiać”) and, even more often, with placards that employed highly exaggerated courtesy to invite the government, the Constitutional Tribunal, the Catholic Church, and all the boomers and enemies of women’s rights to “bugger off.” Some of them were studded with archaisms, while others mixed different language registers, using both formal phrases and expletives, for instance: “You are kindly requested to fuck off” (“Uprzejmie uprasza się wypierdalać”). An interesting combination of these two linguistic strategies appeared in a slogan that transformed the oldest recorded Polish sentence, “Daj, ac ja pobruszę, a ty poczywaj” (“Come, let me grind and you take a rest”) into an appeal to Kaczyński: “Jarek, come, let me grind and you get the fuck outta here” (“Jarku, daj, ac ja pobruszę, a ty wypierdaj”).

Antas and Pstrąg have offered a fascinating linguistic analysis of the protesters’ slogans which identifies and discusses numerous neologisms, aphorisms, puns, and wordplays involving different linguistic domains. Many of them were based on formal or conceptual blending, which means a set of cognitive operations for bringing together elements of different language units, domains, images, and ideas

⁶⁷ Hanka Mostowiak was a character in the Polish series *M jak miłość* [L is for Love] who died in a car accident by driving into a pile of empty cardboard boxes. This absurd episode has since inspired plenty of memes, videos, and jokes.

⁶⁸ As Agata Czarnačka puts it, “A running joke, dating back before the PiS election victory in 2015, is that Poland is a cardboard state, which only looks real from afar.” A. Czarnačka, “Poland: Revolution in times of the pandemic,” *Transform! Europe*, 10 November 2020, <http://transform-network.net/blog/article/poland-revolution-in-times-of-the-pandemic/> (accessed: 14 August 2022).

to produce a new meaning. Explaining why there were so many amalgams among the women's-strikes slogans, they conclude that "conscious artistic revolt and refusal to accept the existing reality always trigger such a linguistic creativity."⁶⁹

Gilles Fauconnier and Marc Turner, the cognitive scientists who proposed the idea of conceptual blending, argue that "conceptual blending underlies and makes possible all these diverse human accomplishments, that it is responsible for the origins of language, art, religion, science, and other singular human feats, and that it is as indispensable for basic everyday thought as it is for artistic and scientific abilities."⁷⁰ In short, the process of conceptual blending lies at the root of human creativity and behind all innovation in the human universe. In my view, although some slogans were simple and lacked linguistic sophistication, the poetics of the protests in 2020, besides its vulgarity and repudiation of the assimilation strategy, intrinsically and pervasively relied on conceptual and formal blending. This was one factor that contributed to the relative autonomy of the poetics of the women's strikes.

As Antas and Pstrąg argue, "slogans from women's marches not only conveyed the negative assessment of the government's actions and the expression of protest in the form of a refusal to accept the existing reality, but they are also intended—by the power of speech acts—to establish a new reality through active resistance."⁷¹ My interpretation goes a bit further than their apt observation; specifically, I believe that the large accumulation of amalgams among the protesters' slogans and graphics proves that what we witnessed was a true innovation: social and cultural change in the making.

⁶⁹ J. Antas, J. Pstrąg, "Kartonowe wojny słowne." Antas and Pstrąg distinguish two, sometimes overlapping, types of blending: conceptual blending (changing domains) and formal blending (phonological play). For instance, "Dear Law and Justice party, I kindly remind you that Hanka Mostowiak was also finished off by cardboard" is one of plentiful conceptual amalgams created by the participants in the women's strikes. According to Antas and Pstrąg, the key phrase in the slogan is "to finish off": a character in a TV series was finished off by a pile of empty cardboard boxes into which she drove, and the slogans written on pieces of cardboard and brought to the demonstrations could overwhelm, wear down, and finish off the ruling party. Antas and Pstrąg emphasize that the slogan harbored a threat: the protesters threatened to finish off those in power with never-ending street protests. As a case of formal blending, Antas and Pstrąg analyze "No woman no kraj." The slogan was based on the homophony of the English "cry" and the Polish *kraj* (country) and on a reference to Bob Marley's classic song. The English-language slogan "Girls just wanna have fundamental human rights," displayed during the women's strikes in Poland and chanted at feminist demonstrations all over the world, is an outcome of both types of blending. The original lyrics of Cyndi Lauper's song, *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*, lose their ludic quality and become a serious political demand. At the same time, the paraphrase is a pun, as "fun" overlaps with the morphological root of "fundamental" and alludes to two domains: the domain of entertainment and the domain of human rights.

⁷⁰ G. Fauconnier and M. Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*, New York 2002, p. vi.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

Cardboard placards performing change

As I observe in “‘Strong, independent women who know their worth and shrug at the very idea of discrimination’” several authors have insisted that the black protests of 2016 revolutionized the public debate on abortion. Over the preceding decades, it had been dominated by the Catholic discourse of morality and marked by the neoliberal withdrawal of the state from economic life. As Alex Cocotas puts it, “abortion ceased to be a medical procedure and became a moral issue; it ceased to be a medical right and became a commodity.”⁷² It has been argued that as the language of women’s rights and social justice was restored in and through the protesters’ placards and chants and as the tradition of reducing abortion to a matter of worldview or morality was broken with, abortion right became a social issue.⁷³

However, such claims are undercut by the analysis of the black-protest slogans, which shows that numerous slogans shared one common denominator: a focus on the freedom of choice.⁷⁴ The rhetoric of the black protests, which featured slogans such as: “I am not pro-abortion, I am pro-choice” (“Nie jestem za aborcją, jestem za wolnym wyborem”), “I live in free Poland. I have a free choice” (“Żyję w wolnej Polsce. Mam wolny wybór”), and “The choice belongs to me” (“Wybór należy do mnie”), does not indicate that a new language of reproductive rights was introduced into the public debate. If anything, it makes me think of it as an expression of the neoliberal status quo: an individualistic discourse fetishizing a vaguely understood freedom of choice, rather than promoting radical discursive change, that is, the feminist struggle for reproductive rights for everyone that needs them, based on solidarity and aiming at social justice.

A new language on abortion was in fact first heard during the women’s strikes launched in the autumn of 2020. Slogans about the freedom of choice were much less prevalent in them, and the term “abortion,” almost erased from the public debate before, started to appear on placards, in speeches, in slogans chanted by the protesters, and even on walls and sidewalks. In my view, such a new language, combined with unprecedented public abortion coming-outs during the demonstrations in big cities, contributed to establishing a new social reality in which pregnancy termination was dragged out into the light from secrecy and the backstreet abortion industry, and ceased to be a taboo. In this new reality, it became possible

⁷² A. Cocotas, “How Poland’s far-right government is pushing abortion underground,” *The Guardian*, 30 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/30/how-polands-far-right-government-is-pushing-abortion-underground> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

⁷³ J. Kubisa, “Odzyskajmy Polskę dla kobiet!,” *Dziennik Opinii*, 10 October 2016, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/odzyskajmy-polske-dla-kobiet/> (accessed: 16 August 2022); see also D. Szelewa’s comment at: International Centre for Research and Analysis, “Feminizm a kwestia socjalna — 30 maja 2017,” YouTube, 16 June 2017, 1:58:12–1:59:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Peu8Rj38FL4> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

⁷⁴ J. Kubisa, “Odzyskajmy Polskę dla kobiet!”

to think and talk about abortion as a basic medical procedure or a common experience of those capable of becoming pregnant.

Writing, carrying banners, speaking, and shouting about abortion in public space violated the gendered public/private divide and questioned the tradition-honored view on “what politics should be, who should gain entry into the public square, and who should remain in the private sphere.”⁷⁵ These gestures were reinforced by the generational nature of the women’s strikes, where a vast majority of the protesters were teenagers (including minors) and young adults, who had previously been ignored and treated patronizingly, in line with the Polish saying that “children and fish have no voice.” Dismantling the public/private divide and challenging the entrenched understanding of the political can also be noticed in breaking the taboo on female sexuality. The protesters minted innumerable slogans that revolved around sexuality, often in an obscene way: “This is my pussy, not Jaruś’s” (“Moja pusia, nie Jarusia”),⁷⁶ “Let’s overthrow that government and make love” (“Obalmy ten rząd i chodźmy się kochać”), “Jarek believes that clitoris is the capital of Dagestan” (“Jarek myśli, że łechtaczka to stolica Dagestanu”), “Dreading to fuck” (“Strach się ruchać”), and “All that’s left is anal sex” (“Został tylko anal”). Carrying placards with such slogans in the streets not only obliterated the private/public line, but was possibly a performative gesture of claiming subjectivity and empowerment by those on the threshold of adulthood, for whom sexuality was a strong taboo.

Participants in the black protests of 2016 also employed slogans and graphics that referred to female reproductive body parts, but those evoked the official language of medical discourse rather than sexuality. Anna Zawadzka claims that this choice was rooted in (neo)liberal discourse, which the poetics of the black protests tended to reproduce. Since the protesters did not recognize abortion as a reproductive right, limited it to the private sphere, declared themselves as apolitical, and rejected any collective political identity, femininity was reduced to a bodily property. Citing multiple examples of the black-protest slogans and images that referred to “ovaries, uteruses, oviducts, vaginas, breasts, and underpants,” Zawadzka anxiously observes that they reproduced “the dominant discourse, which reduces women to the body and makes women’s life determined by the bodily capacities.”⁷⁷

As I argued, that poetics was in line with the liberal interpretation of the private/public division. Edyta Pietrzak and Anna Fligel point out that, seen through this lens, “the situation happening in Poland is an illustration of the appropriation of

⁷⁵ J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, MA–London 2015, p. 78.

⁷⁶ “Jaruś” is the diminutive form of “Jarosław,” Kaczyński’s given name. The slogan in Polish rhymes and is based on the double meaning of “pussy” and the common knowledge of Kaczyński owning a cat.

⁷⁷ A. Zawadzka, “Czarny Protest i płęć,” p. 6.

the private sphere by the public one.”⁷⁸ In 2016, the protesters did not chant “the personal is political” for a reason. They rather thought that “this is necessary to defend the private sphere and to strengthen its privacy.”⁷⁹ From this perspective, the black protests should be perceived less as a feminist revolution and more as a mobilization against the state and its attempts to deprive women of their right to privacy. The study of the slogans and iconography used by the protesters indicates that the proposal of a near-total ban on abortion was considered an illegitimate intervention of the state in the private, an intrusion of the political into a private body.

A distrust of illiberal state institutions also transpires in the poetics of the 2020 protests. However, that wariness was caused by different circumstances. The women’s strikes responded to a breach of the social contract and the refusal of those in power to engage in dialogue with citizens. Women and their allies took to the streets facing an already sealed verdict against them. Unlike the black-protest participants a few years earlier, they did not respond to the abdication of the state by demanding protection of liberally conceived privacy; instead, they called for the takeover of the state’s duties in securing reproductive rights. During the protests, practical information about pregnancy termination, abortion pill dosages, and organizations facilitating access to abortion was widely and concertedly disseminated. Financial support was abundantly encouraged for such organizations, in particular the Abortion Dream Team, a group of activists that soon hit record-breaking figures on crowdfunding platforms. Many of the participants in the women’s strikes probably still remember the phone number of a helpline provided by Abortion Without Borders, an international network of organizations helping women in Poland access abortions. The number was chanted, repeated in speeches, written on walls and sidewalks, and scribbled on plentiful cardboard placards carried by the protesters.

The counter-public of strikers gave rise to a new social reality in which abortion was not only less stigmatized, but also more available. In a grassroots and non-system way, they attempted to bring their idea of reproductive justice into life. Slogans evoking solidarity and sisterhood, such as “You will never walk alone” (“Nigdy nie będziesz szła sama”),⁸⁰ “Solidarity is our weapon” (“Solidar-

⁷⁸ A. Fligel, E. Pietrzak, “The black protest: Abortion law in Poland in the context of division into private and public sphere,” [in:] *Mothers in Public and Political Life*, eds. S. Bohn, P.M. Yelsah Parmaksız, Toronto 2017, p. 299.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁸⁰ While *You Will Never Walk Alone* is the title of a song adopted by many soccer clubs as their anthem, its Polish translation does not evoke straightforward associations with the world of soccer. Polish is a highly inflected language, with the grammatical gender marked in pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and these markers make it clear that the addressee of the message is a female. The slogan became one of the mottos of the women’s strikes. As an apt illustration of their popular, grassroots nature and focus on solidarity, it has often been evoked, reproduced, and reframed. “You’ll never walk alone” was the title of an exhibition at Galeria Labirynt in Lublin. It also appeared in *You Will Never Walk Alone: Let’s Talk about Abortion*, a series of events focused on women’s rights in TR Warszawa. Furthermore, numerous fundraisers and solidarity events have been held under this heading as well.

ność naszą bronią”), and “When the state does not protect me, my sisters I shall defend” (“Kiedy państwo mnie nie chroni, moje siostry będą bronić”), the likes of which had barely been present at the black protests of 2016, were becoming more and more popular in 2020, and for a reason, too. In the face of the withdrawal of the state, which refused to provide its citizens with fundamental reproductive rights, the strikers took over its responsibilities and “instituted a new kind of community, along with an emergent form of the political, charting alternative options for action”⁸¹: they self-organized, founded grassroots institutions and informal citizen support networks, educated each other about pregnancy termination opportunities, and donated to fundraisers for abortion access for the needy.

A distrust of state institutions expressed in the poetics of the women’s strikes also resulted from the fact that the government had launched an extensive apparatus of repression. The illiberal state used police violence against peaceful demonstrators, especially at large events in big cities. The overt hostility of the state was countered by citizen self-organization. The strikers organized groups of lawyers providing free legal assistance to the victims of police repressions, taught people how to minimize the effects of a pepper spray attack, and gave instruction on how to handle encounters with the police. They also informed about the rights of detainees, gathered information on the protesters taken in custody by the police, and held solidarity demonstrations in front of police stations.

The slogans “You will never walk alone,” “Solidarity is our weapon,” and “When the state does not protect me, my sisters I shall defend” not only concerned support in accessing abortion, but also responded to the violence the illiberal state used against its own citizens. Moreover, they articulated solidarity and an urge to protect the most vulnerable groups. Notably, such slogans had been heard and seen on the Polish streets a few months before the women’s strikes broke out: during protests against Andrzej Duda’s queerphobic presidential campaign and the police harassment of LGBTQ+ activists. As Justyna Struzik argues, the slogans informed by and voicing the recognition of state violence, such as those used by the LGBTQ+ community, their allies, and the protesters in the women’s mobilization, can make us realize “that the source of mutual care can be found somewhere else, outside the state—in grassroots self-organizing, and the collaborative development of alternative forms of mutual protection—and that radical solidarity requires moving beyond the framework of the often taken-for-granted state-citizens relationship.”⁸²

Thus the counter-public of strikers that made the idea of “radical solidarity” a reality can be perceived as an embodiment of Judith Butler’s concept of precarious bodies in alliance, bodies that do not just exercise their right to appear in public space “as a coalition framework, one that links gender and sexual minorities with precari-

⁸¹ D. Kosiński, “Prześmiewczość, performatywność, profanacja,” p. 63.

⁸² J. Struzik, “Co nam daje wspólnota protestu?,” *KlimatUJ*, 27 April 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221006102527/https://klimatuj.pl/wspolnota-protestu> (accessed: 16 August 2022).

ous populations more generally,”⁸³ but also establish a future that is worth fighting for. They put into practice the values they advocate and implement the practices of solidarity and sisterhood in reciprocal support of reproductive justice and mutual protection against the illiberal state, which “violated the democratic standard.”⁸⁴

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⁸³ J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, pp. 27–28.

⁸⁴ I. Kurz, “Trzecie wyjście na ulice,” p. 56.

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Joanna Sieracka — a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Cultural Studies, University of Wrocław. Her current research focuses on the cultural specificity of feminism in Poland in the context of the black protests and the women’s strikes.