

“We are remaking our way of thinking about what it means to be members of the same community, and this process has been greatly facilitated by women.”

Izabela Filipiak on Literature, Citizenship and Emigration

in correspondence with Ula Chowaniec

Ula Chowaniec: What does it mean to be a citizen to you?

Izabela Filipiak: Actively changing my environment, bringing something positive just by my being there, connecting people, and giving them ideas to think about. But this feminine business of making people feel well by just being around them can turn into a conscious effort toward making the environment more accessible for those of us who have been routinely denied access, which is what I'm doing now through the foundation (Writers for Peace).

I'm motivated by the belief that all discrimination comes from the same source; for instance, the grandchildren of anti-Semites of the 1930s have proceeded to support their political careers by propagating homophobia in the first decade of 21st century. This process is very specific to Poland; I haven't seen it happening in any other country.

The "other" gets a different set of facial features every now and then, while the mechanism of exclusion remains the same. However, once people begin to speak up and share their stories, they no longer seem alien to one another. As a result, this negative projection of social fears upon the unknown evil homosexual who replaced the unknown evil Jew ceases to influence people's minds.

Have you ever felt as an "emigrant," and I mean a mental construct rather than a legal one; if so, what does it mean?

Being an emigrant and being a citizen are two complete opposites. As a citizen, at least a citizen in a democratic country, I am expected to be creative as I work toward improving my social environment. I'm expected to influence peoples' minds with my ideas. As an emigrant, I'm expected to fit in the machine and perform whatever job the society thinks me fit to perform. No one supposes they can ever become more than fleetingly impressed by my ideas. As an emigrant, I'm preconditioned to be repetitive.

Being an emigrant is a completely annihilating experience. The society expects you first of all

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to be remade in order to fit into its frame. But having to start with a clean slate alone can make you feel like a shadow. Amazingly, even becoming a citizen in the end, as I have become in the States, doesn't really advance you to the level of full bodied humans. I am just as proactive now as I was in the States, I have the same attitude, similar talents; the only difference is that my actions receive lots of positive responses from the people I want to network in Poland and within the EU.

When I did the same in the States, it felt spooky to interact with local people because of their obliqueness. I mean I was like a ghost among them. You get a lot of patronizing treatment when you are an emigrant. I remember this panel about women's rights, when this journalist in Oakland ended up reprimanding me: "You have to learn something about this country first." This was her way of winning an argument because emigration is like a perpetual learning process with no graduation date set to turn you into a consenting adult.

Every time I try to settle in the States, I fail. Each attempt ends in a total waste of time. I cannot consciously embrace American dream; I turn it into a travesty. Only when I return to Poland, my status improves. Last time I returned I taught creative writing and women studies courses; this time I'm teaching American Studies. But more importantly I get to do things I could only dream about doing in the States.

Do citizenship and emigration have gender? Do you think there's a difference between female and male experience of emigration?

I suppose emigration has gender, particularly when you emigrate from Eastern Europe. It's hard to say why, but when a guy emigrates from Eastern Europe, and he is into literary culture, he is expected to be a genius and a future Nobel Prize recipient, but a woman emigrant is greeted with, Oh, let's see how you can be useful to us. Do you know how to cook? Do you know how to sew? Can you clean the house? But surely you know how to spread your legs? If you don't, you are welcome to become depressed. This narrative is so engrained in middle class American minds that it makes me suppose it works as a safety valve to exercise their class prejudices. These men and women are no longer free to be prejudiced against African-Americans and Latinos, but they can safely consider women emigrants from Eastern Europe just white females of a lesser kind. Of course this erases any responsibility on their part, as well as any possibility of perceiving a woman emigrant as an individual.

What does it mean to be a citizen today?

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Noticing how privileged we are to live our lives without being routinely shot at because many people in other parts of the world die without ever knowing how it feels to be safe in the privacy of their own houses. We are so sheltered, compared to what takes place on huge chunks of the planet. I believe that to be a citizen today is to look beyond the scope of your own country, and specifically to oppose militarism. Poland as a member of NATO has joined the U.S. in their occupation of Afghanistan. Since the rampage and bloodshed are not taking place on our territory it is easy to forget that Poland is in a state of war right now. On the other hand, we have refugee camps filled with families from Chechnya in Poland. We have to become aware of all that.

I am using the term "performing citizenship" which is coined similarly to "performing gender": you are a citizen when you talk about yourself as one, you make an effort to meet up with other citizens, you take part in rituals of citizenship (elections, celebrations, debates, etc). What do you think about it?

I was never good at that in either place.

What about excluded groups such as lesbians, transgender people, asylum seekers, are their lives affected by citizenship positively or negatively? Can citizenship take away their stigma (at least for the time of voting), or does it impose another (a citizen of a lesser category)?

I was an asylum seeker at one time. I was amazed by how unsettling it felt; not to me, however, but to people who guard the borders and perform their rituals of citizenship for those who travel from one country to another. I'd see these guards becoming unhinged one way or another as soon as they looked into my passport and discovered that I didn't belong to any country. I actually traveled to Central America with my refugee passport. The more totalitarian the country, the more there was of this kind of thinking, Is she a terrorist? Is she a nobody? Can we just kill her and stuff her in a bag? Being a lesbian was just as unsettling back then. Now at least being a lesbian is some kind of identity. A lesser citizen, yes, but still some kind of a citizen.

Is a cleaning lady a citizen?

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She can certainly perform these acts of citizenship you mention, even if her employers tend to think of her as a serf. However, if the ruling class insists on underestimating a cleaning lady, they are going to regret it bitterly. All populist movements of today are made of citizens who have been mistakenly considered mindless serfs by the ruling class.

Is a homeless person a citizen?

I suppose you need to have an address to vote, so homelessness precludes citizenship. But a homeless person won't find support in a populist movement either. A homeless person is a synonym for what Primo Levi names as *musselman* in the social structure of Auschwitz.

To be a good citizen is to be a good worker/mother/father/child? Is this right?

I haven't stay for long enough in any place to know that.

To be a good citizen is to love one's country, is this correct?

Yes, I think so. I've never loved any country. I'm deficient that way.

To be a good Polish citizen is to be Catholic?

How would I know?

To be a good citizen is to be a man?

I'm just discovering what an amazingly intricate network of NGO's in Poland has been created and maintained by women in the last decade. Women as presidents of non-profit organizations network with women advisors, women experts, and women chairs of education departments in city halls. As soon as Poland joined the European Union, men rushed into politics to divide and rule, and women appeared to be left behind. But at the same time women set out to work with the underprivileged groups and to communicate with one another. As a result, a quiet revolution has just taken place. For instance, senior citizens in my hometown are less likely to join a sectarian group like *Radio Maryja*.

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They rather learn how to dance, or enroll into a higher education program for seniors. So now we are watching the whole country being remade from within, and people learning how to be of support to one another and how to have fun with their lives. We are remaking our way of thinking about what it means to be members of the same community, and this process has been greatly facilitated by women.

Thank you.

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