

# The Landscape of Hate – Olga Tokarczuk in Populist Discourse in Poland

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This article discusses how Olga Tokarczuk, the Polish writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2018, has become a target of right-wing populist discourse, locating her at the centre of the landscape of hate. The features of the affective landscape of hate are discussed from the phenomenological and constructivist perspective. The author argues that the landscape of hate constitutes an important part of right-wing populism based on the narrative of national emergency and the language of war and exclusion (othering).

From 2015, when Law and Justice (PiS), a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party in Poland, started its term of office, until 2019, when Olga Tokarczuk, a Polish novelist, was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for 2018, the PiS government has been engaged in a project of reshaping the cultural landscape of the country so that it conforms to the requirements of the right-wing national discourse. PiS has divided Poland into an imaginary nation struggling for sovereignty, and equally imaginary ‘elites’, which are described as willingly servile and subordinated to Brussels. These divisions serve as a foundation for a new social landscape underwritten by a populist narrative of the nation rising to defend its vulnerable identity against the encroachment of the EU. The sovereign nation and its opposite – the alienated ‘elites’ patted on the shoulder by ‘Brussels’ – is an image as simple as it is effective in engendering social rift. The populist right superimposes this carefully constructed and rhetorically sustained antagonism onto the social and cultural imaginary, reframing the symbolic, affective and even environmental meanings so far constituting the cultural landscape in Poland.

With the parliamentary and presidential elections won in 2015 by the right-wing and Euro-sceptical Law and Justice party and its minor coalitionists, the cultural landscape in Poland changed radically. An overhaul of the national symbolic

environment started with thoroughly coordinated takeovers of cultural institutions such as museums, theatres or places of memory. With institutions under control, the cultural landscape could now be changed at all levels, from funding policies to the overall meaning and mission of culture as the resource for the national imaginary. The right-wing government deployed a fully-fledged populist rhetoric premised on the backlashing restoration of a patriarchal ethos with its bellicose naming of enemies and developing a war language describing right-wing rule in terms of the necessary struggle for a sovereignty threatened from the outside (particularly the liberal, 'leftist' EU) and their inside agents (the 'elites': traitors to the national cause). This rhetoric was to be accompanied by a new collective narrative for the nation. The 'pedagogy of shame', allegedly characteristic of liberals prone to criticize their nation abroad, and of the whole post-1989 period, was to be erased by a new, rectifying tool – the 'historical politics' guarding the appropriate content of national pedagogy and memory. The narrative of national reawakening was framed in an epochal temporality rejecting nearly three decades of lingering 'postcommunism' characterized by servile attitudes to the West (the EU) and its tight-knit networks of influence in the country. In this discourse Olga Tokarczuk has become the main target of othering.

It began in PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński's statement that Tokarczuk, as well as other writers and intellectuals, had been 'bought by Germany', an opinion the leader of Law and Justice shared in *Poland of our Dreams* (2011) [*Polska naszych marzeń*], a book instrumental in bringing the victory of the right in the 2015 elections. Because of Kaczyński's role as PiS's strongman, government officials had to show critical distance from the writer on the eve and in the wake of her national and international awards. Rightist media supporting the government were publishing manipulative (mis)interpretations of her public statements, in which she was openly critical of the deteriorating state of the rule of law in Poland. This sequence shows a continuous, sustained and intentional implementation of what I propose to see as the landscape of hate on the part of the populist right. It manifests the constitutive features of social landscape: it is an organized space of seeing, a mediated representation of the social and cultural environment comprised of ethnic, territorial, and ideological imaginaries (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010: 3). As such, it is a semiotic landscape (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010) in whose multimodal composition affect comes to prominence as a mode of expression. The right-wing discourse constitutes this landscape rhetorically and ideologically. It is also a territorially delineated landscape – even if its 'territory' spans the symbolic sphere, it is no less a palpable landscape than a physical one, because this territory is the contested space of culture and the value attached to it.

Olga Tokarczuk has been an ideal representative of the alienated elites for the rightist ideologues in Poland. Her writing spans a range of concerns which the right tends to either dismiss as foreign fads or object against as encroaching on national traditions and traditional identity models. These are all strongly present in Tokarczuk's writing: gender fluidity and its social and cultural constructedness; ecological concerns and ecocritical ethics, explicitly undermining the anthropocentric frame of reference; a preference for the regional and transborder affinities

and identities making up a unique brand of cosmopolitanism over the national and nation-centred; and an interest in transgressions of cultural boundaries and regimes, which draws her to religious, but also artistic, heresies frequently explored in her fiction, and powerfully so in *The Books of Jacob* ([*Księgi Jakubowe*] 2021 [2014]). Olga Tokarczuk had many opportunities to prove her position as a cosmopolitan author captivating readers (and perhaps scaring some) with her transgressive, posthumanist, but always engaged, imagination. But it was her speech when receiving the Nike Award – the main prize for Polish literature – in 2015 for her *magnum opus*, *Księgi Jakubowe* (*The Books of Jacob* 2021, transl. by Jennifer Croft), a visionary work of fiction about Jakub Lejb Frank, the eighteenth-century leader of a Jewish Messianic group, that incited the wrath of the right-leaning part of the society. Tokarczuk stated:

We have invented a history of Poland as a tolerant, open country, as a country that has not shamed itself with doing anything evil to its minorities. In fact, we did horrific things as colonizers, the national majority which suppressed the minority, as slave-owners or murderers of Jews. (Tokarczuk 2015)

Tackling the subject of the Polish nation as a plausible oppressor of minorities or other nations, or even as a perpetrator of crimes against minorities in her Nike award reception speech, Tokarczuk infringed on the territory of national sacredness upheld by the right in the discourse of ‘historical politics’ (*polityka historyczna*).

In 2021, Tokarczuk’s interview for *La Corriere della Sera*, entitled ‘La Bielorussia come la Polonia: pagano la lentezza dell’Europa’ (‘Belarus like Poland: it pays for Europe’s tardiness’) (Soave 2021) caused a new wave of hate based on the presumption that the Polish writer compared Poland to Belarus and saw both ruling camps as identical. The outrage of the patriotically mobilized parts of society was facilitated by Tokarczuk’s visibility in public space as one of many voices critical of the nationalizing zeal in the politics of the right in power. The right side of the Polish social media organized the action of returning Tokarczuk’s books to the author. In response, the Olga Tokarczuk Foundation decided to auction the returned (and mostly vandalized) books in the support of the LGBTQ+ communities in Poland. The sum collected was impressive; the success of the auction vindicated Tokarczuk’s status as an activist for the sake of social inclusivity, mutual respect, and recognition. However, for the rightist part of the society she has remained the one who ‘informs’ the ‘abroad’ on her country.

The right-wing needed to develop such a landscape of hate to reinforce its populist rhetoric premised on the language of war and the narrative of crisis. It combines the affective environment enticing hate towards the writer and what she has come to symbolize – an entity assigned the place of the ‘other’, with a visible landscaping intervention – the rhetorical horticulture of the right populism, if one can draw on the landscaping metaphor. It is a ubiquitous space created in the public discourse by political and media agents on the right, thus, it has its own materiality of digital media, public discourse and quite an archive of speech and writing. It is also a lived

experience, for those who entice the negative attitudes towards the author, those who replicate and disseminate those attitudes in social media, and also for those who are on the receiving end of those attitudes – the Nobel prize winner, NGOs connected with her or collaborating with her, her readers and, indeed, all those classified in populist discourse as the ‘elites’. The affective load of the landscape of hate calls for a phenomenological perspective that examines the interactive mode of perceiving and making landscape as being in the world (Lozny 2006: 22; Turk 2006: 48–52). The ideological load of the landscape of hate, on the other hand, calls for a constructivist perspective which seeks to examine social landscape as a system of representation generated by meaning-making processes that also involve issues of class/social group reproduction, the vested interest of capital (Soja 1989: 157), and cartographies of power (Soja 1989: 63). The landscape of hate involving Olga Tokarczuk as the figure of the other – the ‘alien elite’ – has all the features of such an ideologically loaded, affective landscape. It is made up of a complex rhetoric of national mobilization combining the nationalist agenda represented as common sense, a range of quasi-objective refutations of ‘liberal’ craze, especially in the form of ‘political correctness’ and the ‘elite’ ‘salon’. At the official level, where government officials and right-wing public figures are involved, it operates through toned-down language and insinuations, so that no direct attacks or verbal aggression can be proven. But it has the effect of enticing more explicit forms of expression in social media, through abusive language and, even, threats.

Affect has been an object of attention in semiotic and linguistic landscape studies as part of the landscape multimodal semiosis. Wee and Goh focus on landscape as ideologically charged and, as such, ‘aimed at regulating the patterns of interactions of those individuals or groups that happen to be located within the landscape’ (Wee and Goh 2020: 2). In this approach, landscape forms an intentional entity (Czepczyński 2008: 44), designed in this particular case to have an impact on individuals or groups through various rhetorical modes of persuasion and appeal. Affect has the performative function in cultural landscape. While ideology makes the landscape intentional, affect makes it act and generate responses. Indeed, affect is what makes cultural landscape shift from representation to enacting the intention inscribed in its ideological load. Hate is the affect whose performative correlate may be, and in this case, indeed has been, violence. Nigel Thrift draws attention to this performative nature of violence as that which ‘works to an agenda driven by the requirements of [...] objects, and not least the affective landscape being produced by the media’ (Thrift 2007: 277). He furthermore points out that violence arises ‘from the alignment of the body with all kinds of prostheses, whether the prosthesis is a smashed glass or a fighter jet’ (Thrift 2007: 277). In the affective landscape of hate against Olga Tokarczuk, violence was performed through mediatized death and injury threats, as well as other forms of verbal aggression (in social media), and in the prosthetic form in the action of sending her books back to the author in protest in 2021. The books were mostly damaged and overwritten with abusive comments.

Most studies on right populism focus on its rhetoric of fear and war (Wodak 2018; 2021; Gaston and Harris-Evans 2017). The implicit assumption of these studies is

that right-wing rhetoric reflects the convictions and beliefs of those who brandish it. It is, however, very important to notice that nationalism and the whole structure of beliefs and practices it fosters has, in today's populism, the role of an instrumentalized environment of collective work which Tim Ingold defines as *taskscape*. He describes taskscape in terms of an array, or ensemble, of interlocked activities performed to a certain end (to embody a life cycle of an entity) and determined by a certain temporality made up of the rhythm of activities involved (Ingold 2000: 194–197). The populist rhetoric of the right develops a taskscape of national emergency in the face of external and internal threats. It is momentous, socially structured, and goal defined. The landscape of hate and the taskscape of national emergency are reciprocally correlative discursive environments of the right-wing format of the cultural landscape in Poland today. Targeting Tokarczuk as some sort of public enemy of the right did not abate when she got the Man Booker International in 2018 for her novel *Flights* ([*Bieguni*] 2018 [2007]), together with her translator, Jennifer Croft, and not even after she was awarded the Nobel prize for literature the next year (for 2018). It only got more ambivalent: while the government officials had to express joy and pride in their compatriot's success, even if adding to it a little fly to the ointment in the form of equivocal assessments of her work, the government-supporting rightist media were launching systematic hate campaigns against her. Since most writers and intellectuals do not share right-wing sentiments and world-views, the ruling camp discourse identified them as an active political opposition to reinforce the alien elites' imagery and to mobilize nationalist rhetoric against them. The latent violence of the populist taskscape could be discharged thanks to the rejection of 'political correctness', endorsing multifarious practices of hate in public discourse and determining the ideological landscape of the ruling right affectively.

The populist topography of the landscape of hate was developing steadily. In the autumn of 2019, when rumours spread that Olga Tokarczuk had a fair chance of being awarded the Nobel prize in literature, the minister of culture, Piotr Gliński, confessed when asked about his opinion on Tokarczuk's writing: 'I have tried to read Tokarczuk, but have not managed to finish any of her books' (Gliński in an interview with Monika Olejnik 2019). This hardly looks like an opinion – just a statement on a personal reading experience that is far from critical, not to say political. Or so it seems. In another interview, the same minister of culture stated in a tone of unabashed reprimand: 'Yes, it's good that a Pole gets a prestigious award. It would be good if she were a sensible Polish writer, who would understand Polish society and Polish community. This is, by the way, a message to all Polish renowned artists' (Gliński in an interview with Meżyk and Olech 2019). The government official's enunciations seemingly communicated not much more than paternalistic displeasure with the writer's critique of the awakening in the public sphere of the national grand narrative of greatness and victimhood, promoted by the PiS government. However, just as Kaczyński's cursory reference to the alienated elites in his book, which had the status of the oracle for his followers, minister Gliński's opinions have to be considered part of the larger discursive field of the nationalist right in which the landscape of hate plays an important role.

It is in this cultural and political atmosphere of a nation mobilized to exercise its sovereignty, that the right-wing populism has instrumentalized Tokarczuk's public statements and work for the needs of its landscape of hate. Right-wing media developed an image of the Nobel prize winner as a recreant to the nation and diligent agent of foreign forces. Interestingly, when Jarosław Kaczyński made his brief but authoritative characterization of what he defined as the 'elites' in his book, Tokarczuk had not made any statements that would identify her political views within the Polish political environment. It was enough that she was not right-wing, and that her international standing was particularly great in Germany, to make her a target of exclusionary rhetoric. Since the right-wing rose to power in 2015, the path delineated by Kaczyński became the obligatory route for right-wing media.

First, it was important to diminish the significance of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Right-wing media, referring to the prize awarded to Tokarczuk, tried to underline its alleged leftist bias, and referred to it as 'socialist' and 'left-wing'. In this frame of reference, the Nobel Prize in Literature had long ceased to represent universal literary values but was granted to the loyal members of the leftist circles (Misiewicz 2019). Dorota Kania and Piotr Lisiewicz, two leading journalists from *Gazeta Polska*, the newspaper with close ties to PiS, linked the Nobel award directly with the alleged position of Tokarczuk's father in the Polish United Workers Party under communism (Lisiewicz 2019). These opinions were not incidental. The core of the narrative of the right is to represent themselves as the oppressed minority putting up a fight against the international mainstream and its planted agents in the country. The conspiracy element of this narrative combines the current mainstream with the post-communist setup operating through obscure but evident channels of influence. Polish writers getting stipends from abroad, especially from Germany, are supposedly part of that network, and being on the foreign (read: German) payroll, obliges them to write as is required from 'cosmopolitan'<sup>a</sup> writers and in the end being rewarded with international recognition:

There won't be Polish elites, but let's say, the cosmopolitan ones. We must come to terms with this. Germans and Jews understood it a long time ago. They know that artists are the best ambassadors of their country. And, after all, both these nations are, for various reasons, interested in presenting Poles as the executioners of Jews. (Misiewicz 2019)

Second, it was equally important to diminish the literary value of Tokarczuk's works by way of intricate deferrals of the negative evaluations of herself as a person under the guise of critical evaluations of her writerly engagements. A political comment from Tokarczuk for the Italian *Corriere della sera* in 2021, in which she observed that the pandemic only helped the repressive measures of the state – giving an example of Belarus as a regime but also mentioning the often-harsh police treatment of women protesting against the abortion ban since 2020 – caused an immediate outrage on the right. The rightist media read this statement as a direct identification of the policies in Poland with the Belarussian regime. This interpretation incited the action of returning the books to the author amidst a hate campaign in



social media. To support the negative assessment of Tokarczuk's statements on the political situation, the rightist media needed an external objective authority that would help diminish Tokarczuk's status as a distinguished writer. To this end, the authority of Stanisław Lem, the Polish science-fiction visionary writer and philosopher, was used. Lem expressed, in 2001, a negative opinion on Tokarczuk's writing and education as a psychologist in an interview in which he stated that the writer offended his reason – this statement became viral in cancelling comments in rightist and social media. Lem's negative assessment of Tokarczuk was used as a typical *ad personam* strategy to represent the writer as intellectually deficient in comparison with the truly great minds (Tomaszewski 2021).

Third, it was important to represent Tokarczuk's statements expressing the anxiety about the deepening xenophobia, indifference towards maltreatment of migrants, and her conviction that Poland is getting closer to authoritarianism, as not just wrong, but inscribed in the expected model of self-hatred, itself the proof that the author is no longer part of the national community, but an agent of foreign stakeholders. Thus, Tokarczuk's statements on the increasing authoritarianism in Poland and the sprouting xenophobia did not meet a thorough polemic on the right, but, rather, were dismissed as ill-informed and dictated by the need to cater to the requirements of 'abroad' and inscribed within the logic of 'oikophobia' (Potocki 2019) – the hatred of home, the opposite of xenophobia, the term coined by Robert Scruton and circulating in right-wing publications in Poland, such as, for example, the *Encyklopedia Białych Plam* 2000–2008. To this end, the key concerns of her writing were presented as evidence of her alienation from the national community. In relation to Jakub Frank, the ambivalent light in which the Jewish eighteenth-century leader was put was received on the right as symptomatic of Tokarczuk's qualms with Catholicism. One of the reviewers complained soon after the book came out in 2014 about the author's insensitivity to the commendable fact of the conversion of Jakub Frank's followers: 'her lack of trust in Catholicism does not allow to marvel over a miracle which was the conversion to the true faith of so many descendants of Abraham' (Horubała 2014). Grzegorz Braun, an MP on far right, summed up Tokarczuk's work as follows: 'the writer advocates placing animals above humans, placing non-Catholics above Catholics and all non-Poles above Poles' (2019). The rhetoric of that accusation was well planned – placing animals above humans is the same as placing non-Poles above Poles. It is equally morally deplorable and proves that Tokarczuk is the same type of the Nobel awardee as Wisława Szymborska, awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1996, which was seen by the right as part of a left conspiracy of the international elite. Reduta Dobrego Imienia, the right-wing recriminatory response to the Anti-Defamation League, issued a statement linking the Nike Award for Tokarczuk in 2015 with her opportunism, warranting the access to money, grants and awards, adding, almost imperceptibly, that she may also be 'weak of mind' (Świrski 2015).

As can be seen, the degradation of the Nobel Prize and other literary awards in literature goes hand in hand with the requirements that writers who want international recognition must be skilled practitioners of 'oikophobia'. The result of this

mechanism proves what has been obvious on the right and expressed in Jarosław Kaczyński's programme book. The elites do not belong to the national community. They are the ultimate other as this social group, which is literally employed to defame their nation. A Ministry of Justice official expressed this attitude most succinctly on 12 December 2019, the day of the official award reception:

Let's be straight: awarding the Nobel Prize to Tokarczuk is the ultimate degradation of this once ennobling award. I am not convinced by arguments that we should be proud, because she's a Pole. Tracking her statements, I do not feel a cultural bond with her, a bond which should link all Poles [...] Tokarczuk, inscribing herself into the German narration about Poles the murderers of Jews. (Matecki 2019)

Since her Nike Award speech, but, in fact, since the Law and Justice leader Kaczyński set the grounds for the anti-elitist othering in right-wing discourse by labelling the writers and intellectuals not subscribing to his political vision an alien element (a term resonating with communist newspeak), Olga Tokarczuk has been a hot potato to handle for the right-wing government. On the one hand, the ruling camp officials had to manifest joy at the fact of their compatriot's prestigious Booker International award in 2018 followed by the Nobel Prize for literature (in 2019, awarded for 2018), and, on the other, they had to abide by the populist ethos of a direct connection with the people and show to their constituencies the continued ousting of the 'elite' writer from the horizon of the national togetherness. Criticizing the author for her cosmopolitanism and 'oikophobia', the rightist media underlined that the awards were granted thanks to the generous funding of her translations by Law and Justice (Bodakowski 2019). Her situation is paradigmatically like that of Salman Rushdie and Orhan Pamuk. Both authors were accused of slandering their national traditions more than once. Like Tokarczuk, their writing showed the fraying edges and holes in the seemingly tightly woven pattern of the national narrative. Like Tokarczuk, both authors were accused of contempt towards their national communities.

In an interview in 2017, Olga Tokarczuk, already visible as an activist writer joining protests against the infringement on human rights in Poland, expressed her anxiety about the society which is now being so intensively implicated in fascist agendas, threatened by the entropy of the democratic order and made increasingly indifferent to the plight of refugees and migrants. Notably, she always says 'we' and never seems to limit her observations to Polish society only. Rather, she speaks about Europe in general. She is concerned about the intensified politicization of artistic labour, or, rather, by the necessity of political mobilization: 'these are not good times for art; as some kind of social communication, it needs to get involved in political debate more often than before' (Tokarczuk, interviewed by Wróblewski, 2017).

Most studies diagnose the rise of right populism and its correlate, nationalism, in Eastern and Central Europe as the aftermath of post-communist transformation ravaging the social through its neoliberal impetus (Pankowski 2010; Stanley and Cześnik, 2019). The well-examined mechanisms of populist rhetoric are othering



and capitalizing on negative affect, such as hate and phobia (Wodak 2021). Populism instrumentalizes social affect by taking advantage of the sense of inferiority and *resentiment* in creating and fostering fear (Homolar and Löffmann 2021). It identifies the ‘elites’ as agents of external enemy forces (Wodak 2018) – Brussels’ beneficiaries, grantees, those bought out by Germany, those informing on their country to Brussels, those disseminating the ‘pedagogy of shame’, and, ultimately, those who get the Nobel Prize of literature for opposing the right-wing ethos. The dense topography of hostile and alien otherness mapping the right-wing landscape of hate uses Tokarczuk as a grand symbol of treason to the national cause. But, as such a symbol, she stands for all the excluded others: associations for supporting civil society and human rights, the LGBTQ+ communities under threat of erasure from the public space), but also practically all the NGOs, including such apolitical organizations as charities collecting funds for hospitals and health care, women’s shelters, or children in crisis helplines, as such organizations have been under concerted institutional attack since 2015. Perhaps this is the position of literature, and art in general: a counter-discourse to the violence-imbued landscape of hate that will be an effective enough challenge to right-wing discourse of national emergency.

### Competing Interests

The author declares none.

### Note

- a. ‘Cosmopolitan’ has a marked meaning here used as a derogatory term in relation to the ‘national’. ‘Cosmopolitan elites’ means elites alienated from the nation. The negative meaning of this qualifier goes back to what is called in language studies on communism the ‘communist newspeak’ (Bralczyk 2002 [1987]; Głowiński 1991). In the communist newspeak the lexeme ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ stood in binary opposition to ‘internationalism’ as the recommended form of supra-national interaction (Słownik PWN). ‘Cosmopolitans’ and ‘Zionists’ were used together to denote the alien and hostile agenda of Jews during the campaign of evicting Jews from Poland in 1968. In 1968, the lexeme ‘cosmopolitan’ was used to cover up anti-Semitism and to objectify the status of Jews as ‘alien’. In the right-wing use the word is not neutral but negative.

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