

QUO VADIS POLISH-CANADIAN WRITING?  
REFLECTIONS ON HOME, LANGUAGE, WRITING, AND MEMORY IN  
RECENT TEXTS BY CANADIAN WRITERS OF POLISH ORIGINS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to look at the recent publications by writers of Polish extraction living in Canada and writing in English in order to examine these texts in the context of their treatment of the concept of home, attitude to mother tongue and the usage of English, as well as the authors' involvement in shaping the Canadian literary scene. The analysis will concentrate on selected texts published after 2014 to delineate the latest tendencies in Polish-Canadian writing. The discussion will include life writing genres such as memoirs, short stories, and novels. Since these writers have undertaken themes of (up)rootedness, identity, and memory and they have touched upon the creative redefinition of the figure of home, these aspects will also be examined from a theoretical perspective in the introductory part of the article. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek through his concept of “in-between peripherality” (2010: 87) proposes to view Central and Eastern European literature as both peripheral and in-between its “own national cultural self-referentiality and the cultural influence and primacy of the major Western cultures” (2010: 87). Moreover, as diasporic studies are inspired by the search for transcultural, dynamic exchanges and hybridity (Agnew 2005), the analysis will also include discussions on hybridity understood as a transgression of borders, both literary and genealogical as well as thematic. That is why, the classic notion of hybridity known widely in postcolonial studies, is here understood, according to Moslund (2010), as having horizontal and vertical orientations, where the former designates transgression of borders and space and the latter is connected to the movement across time. This approach is particularly interesting in the context of Polish-Canadian migrant and diasporic literature as, according to Pieterse (2001), hybridity understood as movement and translocation can offer new perspectives on migrant literatures in multi-and transcultural worlds.

Keywords: Canadian writers of Polish origins; Polish-Canadian writing; diasporic writing; home; hybridity.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last five years Canadian writers of Polish origins have published a substantial range of interesting texts and have thus generated multidimensional answers to the provocative question included in the title of this article. Not only do the texts addressed here represent different generic affiliations but they also tackle many diverse subjects, frequently far from the confines of the 'traditionally' understood diasporic literature. Apart from the already established writers such as Eva Stachniak, the bestselling author of *Necessary Lies* (2000) and winner of the 2000 Amazon.com/Books in Canada First Novel Prize, and Andrew J. Borkowski, recipient of the prestigious Toronto Book Award for *Copernicus Avenue* (2011), there are new writers of Polish extraction appearing on Canadian literary market every year. It is their literary output that this paper will try to highlight in a survey form and, as a result, present the recent phenomena in Polish-Canadian literature.

In the interviews I conducted with them,<sup>2</sup> many writers of Polish origins declare they would prefer to be called Canadian authors of Polish descent or Polish-born Canadian writers as they feel the term Polish-Canadian denominates mainly the authors who publish their works in the Polish language in Canada. This also suggests that the major aim for these novelists and memoirists is to be included in Canadian multicultural literature rather than be categorized only as Polish diasporic writers. As a result, in their most recent endeavors they try to go beyond the themes understood as strictly migrant and concerned exclusively with their search for roots. With the exception of memoirs and selected short stories, all the texts deal with issues that are not or are only loosely connected to the experience of immigration to Canada. Consequently, as I would like to argue, they attempt to contribute to Canadian and world literature, offering universal themes and discussions that may be shared by wide audience. Their choice of topics also includes issues such as identity, maturation, (un)belonging, (up)rootedness, and memory but this recent generation of writers approaches them in a broader way, thus offering a far-reaching and creative redefinition of the figure of home.

Since the majority of writers in question were born in Canada or immigrated there as children (with one exception), they have been formed by Canadian schools and English language instruction solely. Therefore, they must be located both within the Anglo-Saxon culture as well as at the very heart of Canadian multi- and transculturality. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek through his concept of

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews with writers such as Eva Stachniak, Jowita Bydlowska, Aga Maksimowska among others mentioned here were conducted by the author of this article during a research stay in Canada in 2019. They will be published in a forthcoming book.

“in-between peripherality” (2010: 87) proposes to view Central and Eastern European literature as both peripheral and in-between its “own national cultural self-referentiality and the cultural influence and primacy of the major Western cultures” (2010: 87). This statement allows for a two-fold reading of Anglophone literature written by writers of Polish extraction. On the one hand, the fact that these writers have not established a strong and visible body of ethnic authors similar to, for instance, the Ukrainian-Canadian group, would situate them on the periphery. However, on the other hand, their unique space of being in-between, rather than closed in an ethnic ghetto, lets them engage actively in the Anglo-Canadian literary discourse. While analyzing the 21<sup>st</sup> century Polish-North American ethnic writing, Grażyna Kozaczka claims that “for the first time, [this] fiction (...) turns away from the nineteenth-century romantic view of Polish immigration” and these writers “do not engage in recreating the Polish homeland abroad, but rather strive to develop relational ‘portable’ homelands of likeminded relatives and friends” (2019: 152). Furthermore, she also asserts that the characters of the recent texts “are able to move between two cultures – not Polish American and American, as for their ethnic predecessors, but Polish and American” (2019: 171). What stems from the above claim and the current research is the fact that topics strictly limited to ethnic roots and stories of immigration are a marginal, though still important, part of the migrant writers’ literary activity. Moreover, the new generations of writers of Polish background both in the USA and Canada offer new perspectives on writing ethnicity. As a result, Polish-Canadian writing is opened up to new universal readings.

In her *Scandalous Bodies*, Smaro Kamboureli stated that “Ethnicity is not simply a matter of origins. It is indeed a matter of cultural and social contingencies” (2009: 163). Consequently, ethnic literature can be viewed not only as a venue of storing immigration and assimilation narratives, but rather as a space for a more universal discussion on topics engaging wider audiences. In the light of recent debates concerning the status of Canadian literature in all its manifold forms, Kamboureli and Miki in *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature* trace a particular tension between a desired unity of a literary canon and multiplicity offered by variegated literary responses in Canada. Noticing the invigorating potential of Canadian literature, Kamboureli contends:

If CanLit has revamped itself, and is employed today as a referent to a body of works that include Sto:lo, Okanagan, Cree, Ojibway, Métis, South Asian, Japanese Canadian, Trinidadian Canadian, and Italian Canadian authors (to mention just a few examples of literatures that have a minoritized history), it remains a tradition that bears the signs of its troubled trajectory. (2007: ix)

Although the very idea of TransCanada originally came, according to the editors, from the notion of unity represented by the Trans-Canada Highway, Siemerling

in the same volume offers new perspectives on reading the term. He argues that according to dictionaries “the glosses of the prefix ‘trans-‘ include here ‘across, beyond,’ ‘on or to the other side of,’ ‘through,’ ‘into another state or place,’ and ‘surpassing, transcending’.” That is why, he proposes that if CanLit wants “to go ‘trans’-Canada [it has] also to go ‘beyond’ Canada” (2007: 131). In the aforementioned approach, writers of Polish origins who address universal issues or add wider contexts to their migrant stories, respond to the call of going beyond Canada not only through envisioning geographical locations outside of Canada but also through an exploration of their disparate identities and legacies and, thanks to such strategies, they aim at interacting with global audiences.

In his analysis of “transnational turn” (2009: 13), Vertovec claims that due to the media and communication channels “the dispersed diasporas of old have become today’s ‘transnational communities’ sustained by modes of social organization, mobility and communication” (2009: 5). As a result, the literary works coming from diasporas are similar to what Bhabha called “Janus-faced discourse” (1990: 3). In his meditation included in *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha explains:

The locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, not must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning (...). (1990: 4)

It is especially true in the case of such a multicultural country as Canada; a country whose search for a national literary canon has been fairly recent and almost simultaneously has become challenged and informed by narratives from beyond Canada. Thus, Polish Canadian writing can be read as going beyond Canada and at the same time, problematizing the trajectories of the outside/inside dichotomy.

Moreover, as diasporic studies are inspired by the search for transcultural, dynamic exchanges, and hybridity (Agnew 2005), in the case of writers of Polish roots, hybridity can be understood as a transgression of borders between what belongs to the past and their origins, and the present and their current identity. Moslund (2010) proposes to view hybridity as having horizontal and vertical orientations, where the former designates transgression of borders and space and the latter is connected to the movement across time. Following Pieterse’s concept of a “continuum of hybridities” (1994: 173) with their “slow-downs and speed-ups” (1994: 180), he suggests “to connect hybridity to processes of becoming which (...) is understood primarily as an epistemological becoming or change: the transition that takes place when we move from a recognition of the world, the self, the other, to a *re*-cognition of the world, the self, the other” (Moslund 2010: 41, italics in the

original). That is why contemporary Canadian writers of Polish origins can be seen as the ones that, first of all, are subject to these fluctuations of slow-downs and speed-ups and, secondly, as authors who offer analyses and comprehension of universal problems – the aforementioned “*re-cognition of the world, the self, the other*” – in their writing, rather than just reconsideration of their roots.

## 2. Art and home

The themes mentioned in the title of this article such as home, language, writing, and memory are understood by these writers not only straightforwardly as topics conducive to the exploration of their Polish-Canadian identity but also as broader ideas that help to determine their humanity and involvement in the ‘world affairs’. In her book titled *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women’s Fiction*, Roberta Rubinstein writes: “Not merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space, *home* is among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our psychic vocabularies” (2001: 1, italics in the original). Therefore, the treatment of this theme in Canadian literature written by authors of Polish roots is not directly connected to the migration processes, but rather indirectly opens up a discussion of its various and hybrid meanings. Such “contemporary writers (...) are now more likely to be categorized as producers of ‘migrant’ rather than ‘exile’ literature” (Mardorossian 2003: 18), in which the descriptive modifier stands for a plethora of topics not necessarily closely linked with the exilic status. Eva Stachniak, for instance, in her most recent book *The Chosen Maiden* (2017) – a historical novel, also called by Stachniak herself “archival fiction”<sup>3</sup> – based on the life of a famous choreographer and dancer Bronislava Nijinska – widely discusses more general issues connected to migration, being rooted in different cultures, and predominantly the concept of “home as a place of comfort, safety and refuge”, as Mack puts it (1993: 1). Besides, the extended story of ballet and the Nijinskys’ revolutionary role in the development of dance, Stachniak includes the theme of migration and explores what it means to be at home in the world while analyzing Bronia Nijinska’s Polish-Russian, artistic soul. Once a refugee and an immigrant, she lived in Russia, Poland, France, the UK, and the USA, experienced two world wars and the Russian Revolution. In the turbulent period of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bronia decides to emigrate from Russia and move to France. Overshadowed by her brother’s artistic genius, she has to endure the burden of planning the escape through unstable borders together with her children and older mother. Stachniak does not allow Bronia to feel too much sorrow and nostalgia as the dancer is driven by her extraordinary stamina and

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview in June 2019. The conversation is being prepared for publication.

love for dancing. Being equipped with three passports: Russian, Polish, and a Nansen, stateless one, Bronia repeatedly claims: “Mine, I will defend myself, is not a simple story” (Stachniak 2017: 1).

Despite the fact that *The Chosen Maiden* is a historical novel and a fictionalized biography, which may put the book in the popular fiction category, Stachniak’s choice of topic displays her departure from semi-autobiographical narratives of exile and immigration visible in *Necessary Lies* (2000). In Nijinsky’s biography, Stachniak tackles not only the issues connected to ballet, its revolutionary potential, and the need for new trends in art, but discusses universal questions concerning the position of a woman in a male-dominated world as well. Following the aforementioned motifs, Bronia is also a declared feminist at heart. During her whole life, she has to struggle and compete with her talented brother – Vaslav Nijinsky. Moreover, she is also torn between her love for children and demands of art ballet. It is, however, Vaslav who is supposed to be free from all constraints as upon his announcement of engagement, their mother says: “A shotgun wedding, (...) *Pod przymusem*. A game of entrapment. A conspiracy” (Stachniak 2017: 214, italics in the original). This is the environment Bronia has lived in for decades in spite of changing theaters, artistic engagements, friends, and countries. Fighting for her rights as a choreographer, and not a mere ballerina, Nijinska tries to flee from female obligations and expectations. While discussing the question of the position of women and their artistic freedom, *The Chosen Maiden* is simultaneously a story of emigration as Bronia migrated from Russia and Poland, via France and Great Britain, to the USA, and in consequence, she becomes the epitome of an independent migrant who is at home only when she is immersed in her art.

### 3. Language and home

Writers of Polish origins also engage in the exploration of an interesting intersection between language(s) and home. One of the most recent volumes published by The Canadian Polish Research Institute entitled *An Ordinary Move. Memoirs of Polish immigrants to Canada (1988–2012)* (2014) also touches upon the question of home as well as language and linguistic expression. Joanna Lustanski and Jacek Kozak, the editors of the volume, decided to publish the collection of texts in a bilingual edition, including memoirs and diaries of Polish immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1988 and 2012. This is also the only text published recently that deals directly with the migrant experience and, as such, has to be mentioned here. Among eleven texts in the collection many comment on the question of leaving Poland behind and predominantly on their authors’ perception of Canada as a new home. Despite the fact that the short pieces of texts are not sophisticated literary memoirs, they manage to grasp the

emotions accompanying the authors' transition from Europe to North America. Some of the memoirists explicitly write about the suffering which results from their status of being in-between: "An immigrant is probably the kind of person who will always be torn – being in a country he chose for a better life with the pain in his heart, he will think of everything that was left behind, and being in his homeland he will miss all the things that lacked in his life that he has in his second homeland" (Lustanski & Kozak 2014: 198). This state of in-betweenness can be in turn a source of positive reinforcement, as according to Moslund's idea of hybridity "Migrant identity is plural, at once incorporating a diversity of cultural taxonomies but all of them in a fragmented, non-unitary form" (2010: 68). That is why it is possible for the author of the diary to affirm that "My roots are planted deep in Poland and I live in its affairs to this day, but my home is Canada [and] this home is our refuge, a guarantor of peace and safety" (Lustanski & Kozak 2014: 251, 252).<sup>4</sup> This particular fragment resonates with Kozaczka's conviction that the recent generations of migrants are able to acknowledge that their transnational status leads to creative assessment of their current situation rather than reverberates in nostalgic tones and fosters "the discussion on the nature of homeland and individual identity" (2019: 152). This is frequently due to the fact that communication and travel are much easier in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which makes sustaining contacts with family and friends uncomplicated.

The decision to publish the volume of memoirs and diaries in a bilingual form is also worth considering. In her article on Polish migrants authors publishing their books in English in the UK, Joanna Kosmalska, following Alistair Pennycook, asserts that "English has become the transcultural language which is in the continuous process of translation" (2017: 674). The majority of writers of Polish origins include words, phrases, and even the whole sentences in Polish in their works. It happens even in the texts which do not allude straightforwardly to the linguistic aspect of one's identity. These processes rejuvenate the English language and at the same time make reading a transcultural practice. As Pennycook claims "monolingualism (...) is the name for a dangerously monolithic traffic in meaning" (2008: 42) and as such hinders the dynamic exchange of thoughts. *An Ordinary Move. Memoirs of Polish immigrants to Canada (1988–2012)* through its bilingual edition appeals to Canadian readers who do not know Polish and Poles who know either of the languages or both. These instances of the usage of Polish make "the need for boundary transgression central" (Pennycook 2008: 41).

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the diaries are signed with surnames, some with first names and still others with pseudonyms, therefore I have decided to use the names of the editors followed by a page number here, instead of giving pseudonyms such as Dorota, for instance.

In 2017 an unprecedented publication was issued in Canada entitled *Polish(ed) Poland Rooted in Canadian Fiction* edited by Kasia Jaronczyk and Małgorzata Nowaczyk.<sup>5</sup> The writers invited to publish their short stories in the volume had a freedom of choice as far as the topics of their texts were concerned. Many issues have been mentioned and the question of language seems to be among the leading ones. It ranges from discussions on the choice of surname after getting married to more philosophical discussions about the limitations language may impose and finally the nature of mother tongue which the parents use to communicate with their child. In Ania Szado's story "Bottleneck" (2017), Nada Narowski, a character of Polish origins, ponders her status and identity depending on whether she remains Narowski or changes her name to a more Canadian sounding Miller. Since Nada resonates with nothing,<sup>6</sup> she goes even further in shedding off the skin of an immigrant and becomes Susan Amanda Miller in the end. Being tinged with her migrant past, Nada is afraid this very fact may limit her chances in Canada. Her desire to blend in stems from her understanding of hybridity as a notion that defines a person's identity from the inside rather than puts a label and a category from the outside. It is her choices and decisions that should define Nada/Amanda rather than a perception of herself as a migrant agreed upon by others. Although she still remains a hybrid in-between her peripheral past and her Canadian present life, she actively wants to cross the vertical and horizontal boundaries of herself in order to "*re-cognize*" (Moslund 2010: 135, italics in the original) her inner self.

"Scenes from an Imaginary Life" by Dawid Kołoszyc (2017) concentrates chiefly on the linguistic aspect of migration. The narrator ponders the question of exile which coincides with the feeling of linguistic banishment. Having faced its disintegration through the Martial Law in childhood when "The People's Republic had just declared war on the people" (Kołoszyc 2017: 69), the narrator finds himself in exile trying to grasp the best way to live in-between the ghostly memories of his early years and the familiar, yet not fully accessible new

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<sup>5</sup> The anthology comprises a selection of twenty three stories, seventeen of them written by Canadians of Polish and Polish-Jewish extraction who write almost exquisitely in English. Additional six stories are written by authors who have learned about Poland either via a marriage to a Pole, meeting Polish friends in Canada, or a travel to Poland. My choice here comes from the first group of texts. In general, short stories by authors of Polish origins turn out to be particularly interesting and they have managed to attract the attention of readers and critics. In this context it is worth mentioning Krzysztof Pelc's victory in CBC short story contest in 2019. His story "Green Velvet" won the 2019 CBC Short Story Prize and received \$6,000 from the Canada Council for the Arts and a two-week writing residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. <https://www.cbc.ca/books/literaryprizes/green-velvet-by-krzysztof-pelc-1.5083042>

<sup>6</sup> Among various interpretations of Nada, the meaning of the word *nada* in Spanish triggers connotations with nothingness and lack of value.



environs. Living in a new language is compared to living in various incarnations, in secrets and in mirage due to the impossibility of perfect self-expression (Kołoszyc 2017: 67). Kołoszyc asks questions about ‘the limits of [his] words’ (2017: 70) which create a certain barrier between the two worlds: the world of the past and the world of the present. His paradox does not consist in not knowing the culture and language he is immersed in. On the contrary, this semi-autobiographical story proves the opposite. He craves a deeper understanding and a more profound, organic unification with the new home as “he continue[s] the dubious task of filling pages with words that know nothing about [him]” (Kołoszyc 2017: 68). In one of his childhood stories his mother is presented as a person fond of an old Polish saying, “Children and fish were not meant to have a voice” (Kołoszyc 2017: 69), and it is exactly this voice that he does not want to be deprived of. In the light of the aforementioned “Janus-faced discourse” (Bhabha 1990: 3) and “continuum of hybridities” (Pieterse 1994: 173), Kołoszyc’s conclusion that “If words are like us, it’s not because they were born with a single face, but because they wear many faces” (Kołoszyc 2017: 70) can be read as a need for an epistemological, yet exilic, becoming (Moslund 2010).

Kasia Jaronczyk’s story “Lessons in Translation” (2017a) in turn, talks about the nature of communication with one’s son through an imaginary language the mother creates. The story depicts a multigenerational family living in exile in Africa during the turbulent times of 1940s. After a strenuous wandering through Siberia, the family settled in Tanganyika and the main character and narrator of the story met Ajabu with whom she had a son. This “portmanteau child” (Jaronczyk 2017a: 108), as she calls him, becomes the focal inspiration for her debates concerning linguistic belonging. Metaphorically, the mother tongue which she invents and imposes onto her child suggests creation of an intimate sphere, “a home made of sounds” (Jaronczyk 2017a: 109). At some point, the child can no longer live with the non-existent language and he has to learn English in order to function in Canada. Since the extended family left Poland during WWII, when the war was over, there came time to make decisions regarding their stay abroad. The boy’s grandparents resolve to go back to Poland despite the Communist regime as “they were too old to translate their life again, in some new place” (Jaronczyk 2017a: 109), whereas she, together with her son, leave for Canada, “an amalgam country, like a compound word” (Jaronczyk 2017a: 109). Her coming of age among “portmanteau people” (2017a: 108), her former education in German, French, English, and Italian, and her child of mixed origins make her choose a country which corresponds to Pieterse’s dynamic “continuum of hybridities” (1994: 173), where she could creatively respond to horizontal and vertical orientations of the self while making it her home (Moslund 2010). The implied comparison between language and home brings to mind Avtaha Brah’s understanding of home: “Where is home? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic

place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality” (2005 [1996]: 192).

#### 4. Memory, home, and roots

Apart from the initiative to collect the diaries of Polish immigrant to Canada, various independent publications have appeared recently. Among them *Drunk Mom* by Jowita Bydlowska (2011), *Correspondences* by Anne Michaels and Bernice Eisenstein (2013),<sup>7</sup> and *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006) should be mentioned. Nevertheless, Connie T. Braun’s *Silentium and Other Reflections On Memory, Sorrow, Place, and the Sacred* (2017) offers a different perspective on the art of memoir. Braun tells a story of her family, mainly her mother and her maternal grandparents, which turns out to be a story of Mennonites in Poland. As a child of immigrants from Poland to Canada, as a person born into the legacy of this religious group, and as a member of the group perceived for centuries as German she considers identity and home from a particularly profound perspective. Hers is the story of the Polish village of Wymyschle, one hundred kilometers north of Warsaw, inhabited by Mennonites of German-Dutch origins, who despite being wholeheartedly pacifist, due to their origins and the German language they spoke, were imprisoned, enlisted for the army, exiled, and killed during WWII. This complicated history is the background of Braun’s text interwoven into it. It includes stories bestowed upon her by her granny, her mother’s silenced memories, but also her trip to Poland and her Canadian, multicultural perspective. That is why she uses a metaphor of crochet, “the snowflake patterned handiwork (...) the silent mystery that descends; each life is connected to other lives, past, present, and future” (Braun 2017: 15) to depict the interplay between the story of her personal life and others, as well as her own perception of herself and the influences of the past histories and geographies. Her desire to learn the past and connect it to who she has become is closely linked with the place of her grandmother’s origin, “at once a geography of the self and a landscape of otherness” (Braun 2017: 19), but also the mysterious echoes of history she can recognize deep in her heart and mind. Embodying “an elsewhere” (2017: 15) and speaking a strange dialect of “Plaut Dietsch” (2017: 15), calling Poland a home (2017: 57), identifying as German, and finally leaving for Canada, Braun’s mother and grandmother cultivate their

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<sup>7</sup> *Correspondences* is the most experimental in form, and proves the vitality of poetry and life writing forms, but it has already been discussed by the author of this paper at various conferences and two publications, Drewniak (2018) and Drewniak (2019).

identity through language, food, religion, silenced memories. As a result of such upbringing, Braun asks questions about the meaning of place which “connects [her] to [her] story, and to a time before memory; a connection ineffable, intimate, and perhaps sacred” (2017: 142), the value of a Mennonite DNA which she defines as “diasporic Mennonite” identity (2017: 155) and the importance of pilgrimage to a home place that “has spiritual and moral significance” (2017: 151). This particular memoir offers therefore an extraordinary chance to explore the aforementioned issues set against a tangled history of the Polish lands, as well as intergenerational relationship of women who are the treasurers of memory and heritage.<sup>8</sup>

Fiction by Norman Ravvin or Zoe C. Greenberg in turn brings back the memory of Jews living in Poland in the past. The short stories included in the aforementioned anthology *Polish(ed) Poland Rooted in Canadian Fiction*, “The Dulcimer Girl” by Ravvin (2017) and “The God of Baby Birds” by Greenberg (2017), evoke in a nuanced and explicit way the Polish-Jewish coexistence and its remnants in both the landscape and people’s minds. Nadia, a young musician employed to perform Polish-Jewish music on the filming spot, “cannot read the landscape” (Ravvin 2017: 165), which turns out to be a revealing statement.<sup>9</sup> A musician skilled in playing the dulcimer and having a working knowledge of Polish-Jewish music, Nadia is foreign to the region. Ravvin’s short story, in a delicate way, explores Martin Pollack’s perception of Polish landscape as contaminated and rarely uncultivated (2014). Though frequently seen as soothing and idyllic, landscapes in Central and Eastern Europe often hide cemeteries, bloody battlefields, and execution sites, the traces of which cannot be ‘visible’ in the contemporaneous times. Despite the lack of tension and rapid action, Ravvin’s story stimulates thoughts about the sites of memory (*les lieux de mémoire*) in Pierre Nora’s (1989) understanding of the term, the question of home and the need to remember about the past inhabitants of the land. Greenberg’s text, in turn, depicts the 1968 exodus of Jews from Poland and its consequences for personal friendships as well as collective memory that was formed in its aftermath. “The God of Baby Birds” (2017), although plain and simple in its plot construction, offers a profound inquiry into the concept of borders in Central and Eastern Europe. Set mostly in post-1968 period, the story projects two teenage girls, Olga and Leja, who live together after Leja’s parents leave for Israel. The two friends, in their innocent and affectionate relationship, reject the political divisions and resist the growing anti-Semitic atmosphere. Instead, they create an

<sup>8</sup> Braun’s father and paternal grandfather, also Mennonites, spent many years in Ukraine and their story is explored in another of Braun’s books *The Steppes are the Color of Sepia: A Mennonite Memoir* (2008).

<sup>9</sup> This short story is a fragment of Ravvin’s latest novel which has been published as *The Girl who Stole Everything* (2019).

intense bond and despite the girls' idealistic belief in the existence of the world with no divisions, they cherish this friendship by escaping to a forest hiding that stands for a space of freedom untinged by power and gender relations operating in the outer world.

Emil Brix sees European borders as purely political constructs and, as such, rarely formed by cultural and geographical factors (2012: 147–148). In this context, “The God of Baby Birds” becomes not only a story of growing up, but predominantly a commentary on divisions and borders and the ways in which they are not created alongside cultural and geographical lines. “The God of Baby Birds” is also a story of burgeoning femininity and undertakes the topic of maturation of teenage girls. Leja and Olga used to live together, shared the space, town (so, geography) and home, language, and culture. According to Brix, borders cannot be abandoned but they may constitute either a bridge or a barrier (2012: 157), and, thus, when identity is questioned, there is always the other, but it may be treated inclusively or exclusively. Greenberg's short story rewrites the 1960s as a dark period in Polish history.

The debate on identity, its roots and evolution of the concept of home can be also noticed in two interesting books, *Art Lessons* by Katharine Koller (2016) and *Lemons* by Kasia Jaronczyk (2017b). The former is a novel depicting in a vignette style a process of growing up and Kasia/Cassie's coming of age. In the course of the novel, she evolves from a Polish immigrant child into a Canadian woman, an individual aware of her roots, and finally a visual artist. The latter is a volume of interconnected short stories presenting Basia from the period of her childhood in Poland to mature years in Canada. The fact that Jaronczyk is interested in pre-1989 Poland helps her comment on Communism and its impact on people. She also redefines the idea of homeland from the perspective of her Canadian experience as well as life's trials and tribulations. Basia's growing up coincides with her illness that makes her feel as if she “had a brain but no body” (Jaronczyk 2017b: 114), which opens up a discussion on femininity and the position of women in society. Despite obvious differences in the form and plots, these two texts can be seen as parallel immigrant stories in which the discussion of belonging and home takes place.<sup>10</sup>

*Art Lessons* adopts a form of Bildung- and Künstlerroman and Cassie, through her passion for drawing and painting trees, communicates her ideas of un/belonging. From the very beginning of the story, Cassie has a close bond with her grandmother, a Polish Babci who also lives in Canada but is profoundly engrossed in her past and her religious rituals. As children, Cassie and her siblings do not pay that much attention to granny's ideas, cherishing the homely

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<sup>10</sup> *Lemons* by Kasia Jaronczyk is a collection of intertwined short stories, and as such, offers many nuanced discussions on a variety of topics. A separate discussion on Jaronczyk's text is to be published in 2021.

atmosphere she creates. Alongside the suggestive chapters titles such as ‘Memory Tree’, ‘Family Tree’, or ‘Tree of Possibilities’ Koller moves Cassie through various stages in her life and they become symbolic of her character’s development. She goes through a rebellion against her parents, who, having several kids, cannot fully devote their time to her, and especially her father who opposes her choice of artistic career instead of a more firmly grounded business. Cassie also experiences first infatuations, one of which finishes with a dramatic car accident she has with her boyfriend after high school final exams.

Throughout the story, the girl observes her ageing granny and defines herself in comparison and in opposition to her. Near the end of the book, in art school, she realizes she is a separate individual who has to live on her own, but who is simultaneously deeply rooted in her family’s past: “I like to think my taking risk comes a little bit from [my father]. But a lot from Babci. A country, an ocean and then a whole continent. (...) Babci’s hands fall to mine. They land like cones at the bottom of my heart, and take root” (Koller 2016: 173, 176). This moment of awareness reminiscent of a Joycean epiphany is a necessary step for the young artist to become independent and self-identified. It is interesting to note that Koller uses similar arguments Stephen included in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Cassie realizes she has to leave for a university as “being an artist means always learning and growing and that you need to travel to find teachers and opportunities” (2016: 182). The metaphor of trees becomes a figure of home synonymous with finding one’s place to live and one’s path in life. Trees, with their tangled branches and roots, also allude to the outer world, the space that is still unknown and needs to be discovered. Again, similarly to Joyce’s Stephen, Cassie’s story concludes in the following way:

I am Cassie Aleksandra  
sister of Stella Mariana,  
daughters of Diamonda (Dida) Stephania,  
sister of Magda Evanjelika,  
daughters of Zofja Wiktorja,  
sister of Rosella Bacia,  
daughters of a woman in Poland  
whose name I don’t know. (Koller 2016: 184, spelling in the original)

She then continues: “I really want to know the name of the woman in Poland, and her mother and all the mothers before her. There are edges I need to explore” (Koller 2016: 184). Consequently, she needs to move into the past in order to excavate her history and move beyond that past to be able to grasp the sense of her vertical and horizontal hybrid self. Similarly to Joyce’s Stephen, Cassie must do it on her own and away from home.

## 5. Conclusion

The above discussion of recent Canadian writing created by authors of Polish origins offers a panoramic survey of genres and themes present in (Polish) Canadian immigrant prose. While it aims at being representative it is by no means exhaustive.<sup>11</sup> Following Kamboureli's and Kozaczka's views on ethnic literatures in North America and their claims that writers of particular ethnic origins are nowadays more prone to focus on their being in Canada or in the USA rather than concentrating only on their past and their immigrant experience, the Canadian writers of Polish extraction discussed in this article widen the scope of their inquiry towards issues such as art (Stachniak, Koller, Ravvin), history (Braun, Stachniak, Jaronczyk), and language (Jaronczyk, Kołoszyc, Szado, and stories from Lustanski and Kozak's anthology) among others. Furthermore, these themes do not refer explicitly to the processes of immigration to Canada but rather constitute Brah's "homing desire" in a location that has "*become home*" (Brah 2005 [1996]: 193, italics in the original) at some point in the writers' (and frequently their characters') lives.

As this analysis also tried to demonstrate, the writers in question acknowledge Vertovec's "transnational turn" by responding to this idea from within but also from beyond Canada. Many texts analyzed here have moved from the exploration of *les lieux de mémoire* to the celebration and recognition of Canada as a home. No matter which particular topic they discuss, migration is seen as homecoming<sup>12</sup> and this "'homing desire' is not only about leaving the originary home behind, fixing it into a distant past, and seeking hominess elsewhere. It can also be part

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<sup>11</sup> Apart from the aforementioned examples, it is worth indicating the publication of Jowita Bydlowska's *Guy* (2016), a story of a misogynist man who, though a gentleman on a daily basis, abuses women psychologically. There are also two other books which have to be acknowledged. The first, *Matches: A Light Book* by S. D. Chrostowska was originally published in 2015 and revised in 2019. Compared to Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human* and Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, it is a text which escapes any generic classifications as it combines aphorisms, fragments of others' texts, quotations, and Chrostowska's philosophical and literary reflections. According to critics: "The fragments can't be glued together, but they do suggest a lost wholeness that is impossible to reclaim in this breaking world" (Burse 2016). Secondly and finally, Tanya Talaga's *Seven Fallen Feathers* (2017) needs to be mentioned as well. Talaga is of mixed Polish-Indigenous descent and her non-fictional book has won numerous awards and become a national bestseller in Canada. The text explores the period between the years 2000 and 2011 when seven Indigenous high school students died in Thunder Bay. Through this journalistic inquiry about the mysterious deaths, Talaga examines Canada's struggle with its racism, indolence of the police and administration as well as unhealed wounds in the Indigenous – White relations in Canada and in the Americas. Both Chrostowska's and Talaga's texts are so varied and touch upon so many different and important topics that they have to be discussed separately and require a deepened critical attention.

<sup>12</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Anne-Marie Fortier (2003: 117).

of returning ‘home’ to re-member it differently” (Fortier 2003: 130). Thus, reconsidering one’s roots in order to establish oneself anew is a dynamic, as well as emotional and spatial, process which opens up new perspectives for Canadian writers of Polish origins.

It can be clearly noticed that all the above-mentioned writers, although interested in the exploration of their roots, are more concerned with who they are in Canada. All of the texts discussed in this article reconsider the origin stories but are far from being mere immigration narrative. They all engage the vertical and horizontal understanding of hybridity and move beyond and across Canada in order to incorporate disparate meanings and interpretations that may stem from an experience of in-between peripherality on the one hand and participation in mainstream, Anglophone culture on the other. The Canadian writers of Polish extraction are, therefore, able to “see their identity simultaneously in terms of place of origin and of place of residency” (Bennett 2005: 10). Moving from immigrant memoirs and novels inspired directly by stories of exile and emigration, the writers in question examine issues linked with diasporic identities, borders, and engage in reflection on the epistemology of the self. However, more and more willingly, through their usage of the English language as the only means of their expression, they also explore selfhood in temporal and spatial ways, offering a certain transgression of genres and crisscrossing different dimensions of the past to “*re-cognize*” themselves (Moslund 2010: 135, italics in the original).

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