

SONIA CAPUTA<sup>1</sup>  
University of Silesia

## (Post)communist homelessness? Identity and belonging in Dagmara Dominczyk's *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*

Dagmara Dominczyk's *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* mirrors her own experience as a Polish émigré of the early 1980s and touches upon the myriad stages of exile. Similarly to other American writers of Polish descent (e.g. Leslie Pietrzyk, Karolina Waclawiak or Anthony Bukoski), the writer's debut novel explores the problematic questions of immigrant's assimilation, desire for acceptance or one's ties to the home country. But above all, Grażyna Kozaczka notices that "[the literary work] offers an additional option opened to Polish American fiction writers", because the main character of the book, Anna Baran, is able to embrace both: Polish and American culture and claims two homelands as her own. Whether the protagonist is completely free from immigrant-homelessness or not, seems to be a thought-provoking matter as it seems that Dominczyk's protagonist is engrossed in the yearning desire to return to the country of her forefathers; i.e. to Poland in general and Kielce in particular. However, the city of her birth and simultaneously the place where she spent her summer holidays, which is aptly described by the author of the novel in the moment of transition (as communist Poland of the late 1980s alters into a democratic country) belongs to the sphere of her memory and a real return to the past time is not possible. Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to shed some light upon the issues of identity, questions of belonging and nostalgic allegiance in Dominczyk's novel *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*.

**Key words:** post-communist homelessness, diaspora, nostalgia, Dagmara Dominczyk, Svetlana Boym, Polish American literature

Dagmara Dominczyk's *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* mirrors her own experience as a Polish émigré of the early 1980s and touches upon the myriad stages of exile. Similarly to other American writers of Polish descent (e.g. Leslie Pietrzyk<sup>2</sup>, Karolina

---

<sup>1</sup> Contact: soniacaputa@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Pietrzyk is the author of novels and short stories (*A Year and a Day*, *This Angel on My Chest*, *Silver Girl*), who has been praised within literary circles for the depiction of Polish American

Waclawiak<sup>3</sup> or Anthony Bukoski<sup>4</sup>), the writer's debut novel explores the problematic questions of immigrant's assimilation, desire for acceptance or one's ties to the home country. But above all, as Grażyna Kozaczka notices, "[the literary work] offers an additional option opened to Polish American fiction writers"<sup>5</sup> as the main character of the book, Anna Baran, is able to embrace both: Polish and American culture and claims two homelands as her own. Whether the protagonist is completely free from immigrant-homelessness or not, seems to be a thought-provoking matter. Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to shed some light upon the issues of identity, questions of belonging and nostalgic allegiance in Dominczyk's novel *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*.

Dagmara Dominczyk is known as a Polish American actress appearing in numerous film, TV and theatre productions rather than a serious writer of fiction. Her engaging debut novel, however, published in 2013 and entitled *The Lullaby of Polish Gils* received positive feedback from literary critics, who praised Dominczyk's "fresh and confident style"<sup>6</sup>, "depth, intensity, humor, and grace"<sup>7</sup> as well as "honesty and realism to the writing and emotions"<sup>8</sup>. Her novel has been also described as "a homage [paid] to [Dominczyk's] native city of Kielce [...], a triptych of  *tęsknota* (yearning) and of a profound desire for acceptance, freedom and home"<sup>9</sup>.

---

women in her debut novel, *Pears on a Willow Tree*, which was published in 1998. On the one hand, Pietrzyk, focuses on the hardships of emigration and assimilation in the twentieth-century America but, on the other hand, also touches upon the questions of complicated mother-daughter relations and contributes to the feminist dimension of contemporary Polish American literature.

<sup>3</sup> Karolina Waclawiak is a representative of the so-called one-and-a half generation of Polish immigrants from the 1980s post-Solidarity wave; she has published two critically acclaimed novels *How to Get into the Twin Palms* (2012) and *The Invaders* (2015). While her latest book does not concern the questions of assimilation and immigration, her debut novel depicts experiments with ethnic cross-dressing and reinvents the immigration story. The protagonist of *How to Get into the Twin Palms*, Zosia, a Polish American resident of Los Angeles, yearns to become Russian in order to be granted entrance to the mysterious and appealing Russian nightclub.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Bukoski is an acclaimed writer of several collections of short stories (*Twelve Below Zero*, *The Children of Strangers*, *Polonaise*, *Time Between Trains*, *North of the Port*, and *Head of the Lakes: Selected Stories*), who has created the literary world of Polish American cultural exiles and sheds some light on the culture of American Polonia, folk religiosity, the network of family relationships, the ubiquitous nostalgia for the past, attachment to the land, and polka music.

<sup>5</sup> G. Kozaczka, *Writing Poland and America: Polish American Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, "Polish American Studies", Vol. LXXIII, No. 1 (Spring 2016), p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> People, a review. <https://www.amazon.com/Lullaby-Polish-Girls-Random-Readers/dp/0812983823> [Accessed: 27.05.2017].

<sup>7</sup> A. Trigiani, a review. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/220293/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls-by-dagmara-dominczyk/9780812983821/> [Accessed: 28.05.2017].

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Cutler, *Dagmara Dominczyk: The Lullaby of Polish Girls – a review*, NJ Advance Media, [http://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/index.ssf/2013/07/dagmara\\_dominczyk\\_the\\_lullaby\\_of\\_polish\\_girls.html](http://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/index.ssf/2013/07/dagmara_dominczyk_the_lullaby_of_polish_girls.html) [Accessed: 28.11.2017].

<sup>9</sup> Booklist – starred review. <https://penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/220293/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls-by-dagmara-dominczyk/reading-guide> [Accessed: 28.11.2017].

Furthermore, the author's cast of characters is believed to be "broad in scope [even though] each one is richly imagined"<sup>10</sup>, and the literary work itself seems to be appreciated for "its strong sense of place and the light it shines on the bittersweet process of growing up and moving on."<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, this profound desire for acceptance, freedom and home has got multiple facets in Dominczyk's novel and one may analyze them from different angles and various perspectives. On the one hand, Dominczyk's literary work is embedded in nostalgia (for her home country/a sense of rootedness), on the other hand, however, her novel displays some features of diasporic consciousness and may shed some new light on the idea of location of home for Dominczyk's central character / the author's alter ego. Therefore, in order to analyze Dominczyk's potential post-communist homelessness depicted in *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* one may need to take into consideration not only the questions of nostalgic allegiance but also the notion of 'home', which the concept of diaspora embodies. For the purposes of the analysis, the present article borrows conceptual tools and insights from the theoretical considerations of Svetlana Boym, Roberta Rubenstein, Avtar Brah and Robin Cohen. Attempting to address the issue of homelessness in *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* I begin the article with the explanations of the concept of nostalgia proposed by Boym and then I proceed to the notions of the homing of diaspora and the diasporising of home elaborated on by Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. What follows is the brief summary of Dominczyk's literary work (for the sake of conciseness as well as clarification) and the analysis of the novel. The last section of the article is devoted to the presentation of the final remarks concerning the idea of rootedness and the desire for home in *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*.

To invoke the concept of nostalgia is to render salient the variety of meanings it assumes. Nostalgia does not only imply mourning over displacement and irreversibility of time, but it also denotes craving for a place or home which does not exist anymore. Nostalgia, in Svetlana Boym's view, may be compared to a romance with one's own imagination, presenting a blend of two perspectives: the reality and sheer fantasy, the past and the present. It would probably be hard to unequivocally define what people long for, because the alluring target is perpetually ungraspable. Nonetheless, it has been assumed that nostalgia denotes homesickness and the desire for a different dimension of time, especially the time of one's own childhood, or youth<sup>12</sup>. At first glance, Boym asserts, "nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the

<sup>10</sup> Library Journal, a review. <https://www.amazon.com/Lullaby-Polish-Girls-Random-Readers/dp/0812983823> [Accessed: 27.05.2017].

<sup>11</sup> Poornima Apte, BookBrowse review. [https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book\\_number/2885/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls](https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/2885/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls) [Accessed: 27.05.2017].

<sup>12</sup> Cf. S. Boym (2002), Nostalgia i postkomunistyczna pamięć, in: Modrzejewski, F., Sznajderman, M., (ed.) *Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, p. 274.

slower rhythms of our dreams; in a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.”<sup>13</sup> Nostalgia might be also catalyzed by the displacement from a cultural community. Roberta Rubenstein defines this kind of feeling as the “cultural mourning” which, in her view, signifies “an individual’s response to the loss of something with collective or communal associations: a way of life, a cultural homeland, [...] or the related history of an entire ethnic or cultural group from which [one] feels severed.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Rubenstein asserts that “culturally displaced or exiled people may mourn their separation from homeland, community, language, and cultural practices [or ways of life] that contribute to identity.”<sup>15</sup>

An idealization of the supposed ancestral home is also one of the features of diasporic imagination. Robin Cohen while analyzing various fibres of the diasporic ropes in *Global Diasporas* stresses the significance of a collective memory and myth about the homeland and claims that “highly romantic fantasies of ‘the old country’”<sup>16</sup> are maintained among the members of dispersed communities. What seems to be crucial in this context is the fact that there exists a link between the notion of nostalgia, romantic fantasies and the act of dispersion itself which, as Avtar Brah concludes, refers to diaspora because the word “embodies a notion of centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs.”<sup>17</sup> Such a ‘home’ may be described as a “mythic place of desire”, or “a place of no return,”<sup>18</sup> even though it is possible to physically visit the country of one’s origins. Additionally, a ‘home’ might be a “lived experience of the locality”<sup>19</sup> with its smells, sounds, and other positive or negative emotions that it evokes. This is what Brah has to say about the question of ‘home’ within the diasporic imagination:

The concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origin, while taking account of a homing desire. The homing desire, however, is not the same as desire for a ‘homeland’. [...] The multi-placedness of home in the diasporic imaginary does not mean that diasporian subjectivity is ‘rootless.’ I argue for a distinction between ‘feeling at home’ and declaring a place as home. [...] Processes of diasporic identity formation are exemplars par excellence of the claim that identity is always plural, and in process. [...] The concept of diaspora refers to multi-locationality within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> S. Boym (2001), *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, p. xv.

<sup>14</sup> R. Rubenstein (2001), *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women’s Fiction*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> R. Cohen (1997), *Global Diasporas: An introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> A. Brah (1996), *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

Taking into consideration Brah's remarks, the supposed homelessness of the Dominczyk's central character might not necessarily evoke the lack of home per se or rootlessness but may refer to the protagonist's multi-locationality or double/multi-placedness of 'home' in Dominczyk's diasporic perception, which seems to be alluded to by Grażyna Kozaczka.

While elaborating on aspiring new Polish American literary voices in the article "Writing Poland and America: Polish American Fiction in the Twenty-First Century" Kozaczka notices that "[Dagmara] Dominczyk frees the character of Anna Baran from the possible feeling of immigrant-homelessness [...] as a condition of permanent suspension between the country of origin and the country of immigration."<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that, as Kozaczka further observes, "[Anna] feels equally comfortable in each culture, is successful in a career that requires native-like language ability in America, and can pass for a native in Poland,"<sup>22</sup> I humbly venture to claim that such a statement may not be entirely applicable to Dominczyk's central character as the Polish American protagonist still feels a yearning desire to return to the country of her parents (which she definitely does several times over the course of the novel) in order to establish herself anew and, while living in the United States and being overwhelmed with a feeling of nostalgia, she still perceives Poland as her true home. Therefore, on the one hand the character seems to be freed from the feeling of "permanent suspension" but, on the other hand, does not entirely and effortlessly embrace two cultures and wholeheartedly claims two homelands as her own.

It may not be denied that in order to skillfully capture the harsh Polish reality of the late 1980s and the 1990s Dominczyk heavily draws from her own experiences as a girl who was moving back and forth between the United States and Poland before settling in America. Hence, the book possesses a lot of autobiographical/semi-autobiographical elements. Similarly to Anna Baran, who is the protagonist of the novel, Dominczyk made annual visits to Kielce and spent summers in Poland. What is more, the fictional account of Baran's immigrant experiences, at least partially, coincides with Dominczyk's real life story, i.e. both the character of the novel and the writer herself were born in Poland and became famous actresses; both of them were also forced to immigrate to the United States with their parents. In the novel, Anna's parents have to flee Poland in the threat of political imprisonment as the country remains under Communist rule and Dominczyk's family escaped from their homeland as political refugees seeking asylum in the United States due to her father's involvement in the Solidarity movement.<sup>23</sup> The fact that

---

<sup>21</sup> G. Kozaczka, *Writing Poland and America...*, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Cf: Dagmara Dominczyk's biography. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0231436/bio> [Accessed: 28.11.2017].

*The Lullaby of Polish Girls* possesses autobiographical elements seems to be crucial in the context of diasporic considerations because, as Brah insists, autobiographical accounts often offer critical insights into the politics of location, or locationality in contradiction, i.e. one's ability to experience simultaneous situatedness<sup>24</sup>.

The plot of the novel touches upon the lives of three friends: Anna Baran, Kamila Marchewska, and Justyna Strawicz. Anna is a successful Broadway actress, whose acting career has somewhat stalled, and despite being "Slavic-looking Marilyn Monroe"<sup>25</sup>, Baran is on the verge of mental breakdown after abortion. The second significant literary character is Kamila, who is approximately at the same age as Anna, and moves to the United States in order to distance herself from recent events, i.e. the discovery of her husband's homosexuality. Finally, the author provides the readers with an insight of Justyna's troubled life. Strawicz used to be an adventurous and promiscuous Polish teenager, a female Don Juan, but in her adolescent years she becomes a loving and caring mother even though Justyna does not avoid drinking alcohol and using blatant swear words. The intertwined lives and experiences of the trio of friends are recounted by Dominczyk over the period of thirteen years, "across the decades and the Iron Curtain, from Communist Poland to adulthood"<sup>26</sup>, from their teenage years to the loss of innocence and the stunning murder of Justyna's husband that brings the characters together and allows their bond to be ultimately renewed. The narrative moves seamlessly in both time and place and the alternating chapters allow the author to present the characters' teenage exploits, first infatuations, nocturnal escapades and "prosaic arcs of their present-day plight[s]"<sup>27</sup>.

If one takes into consideration the fact that "home is viewed in terms of identity and identification sought by [...] writers in their particularly isolating experiences such as alienation, exile, emigration"<sup>28</sup> it may be concluded that for the fictional character of Dominczyk's novel, "home" stands for Kielce as the protagonist is prone to identify herself with the town of "the scyzoryki, the switchblades"<sup>29</sup>. On the other hand, to complicate somewhat, if one assumes, as Bożena Schallcross explains, that "home in the Polish sense of the word is both a place one identifies with and the place one built and furnished to inhabit"<sup>30</sup> for Dominczyk's main character, Poland is the place she associates herself with but Greenpoint, Brooklyn, New York,

<sup>24</sup> Cf. A. Brah, *Cartographies...*, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> D. Dominczyk (2013), *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*, London: Quercus Editions Ltd, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> L. Nolan, Review of *The Lullaby of the Polish Girls*, "Publisher Weekly", 2013. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-8129-93554> [Accessed: 28.11.2017].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> B. Schallcross (2002), Home Truths: Toward the Definition of the Polish Home, in: Schallcross B. (ed.), *Framing the Polish Home: Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby...*, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> B. Schallcross, Home Truths..., p. 2.

is more of a physical space where her dwelling place is located. Maybe that is the reason why Anna Baran, as the author of the novel clearly states, “has two sides; she feels split between two languages, two places, constantly aware of the chasm in her life”<sup>31</sup>. Anna, however, does not seem to be equally and firmly rooted in both Poland and the United States. If one pays careful attention to Dominczyk’s rather scarce descriptions of Anna’s New York life and her feelings towards the city ‘that never sleeps’ one may discover that for the protagonist New York is the place which makes her feel alone, and her Brooklyn apartment seems to be the abode of utter misery. Anna, being an adolescent, is depicted as a chain smoker constantly balancing an ashtray on her lap; suffers from insomnia most of the time and occasionally, when she does fall asleep, has nightmares “about the Gestapo and a defunct Captain Video – the place she used to rent VHS tapes as a girl”<sup>32</sup>. Except for Polish (girl)friends and her American boyfriend, Ben, who is not fully aware of his partner’s emotional crisis, the protagonist does not engage herself in sustaining any meaningful relationships in the United States. When Anna is a child “nobody wants to come to the projects to sit in [her] room and stare at the posters of Elvis, New Kids on the Block, and the lone map of her homeland”<sup>33</sup> and similar feelings of alienation and estrangement are aroused in her when she becomes an adult. The lack of willingness to assimilate into American culture and an overwhelming sense of isolation are the features that may also aptly characterize her parents. Anna’s mother is addicted to “the Polish satellite channel playing episodes of her favourite soup opera *Złotopolscy*”<sup>34</sup>, and her father sinks into severe depression and threatens to commit suicide because “when Poland held its first democratic elections in 1991, he couldn’t get over the fact that he wasn’t there to celebrate with his old friends”<sup>35</sup>. Dominczyk comments upon Mr. and Mrs. Baran’s views towards acculturation as follows:

There would be no Thanksgiving in New York, but there again, there never had been. Her parents didn’t partake in the turkey. Her father was firm in that regard. ‘I steal land from the Indian, I rob his everything and put him on casino war camps and now I eat like [a] pig to celebrate? No way!’<sup>36</sup>

At the age of seven, Anna, as an immigrant child, was “in a constant state of pining, for what and for whom [however] she did not know”<sup>37</sup>, striving hard to be “all that her parents demanded – studious, proud and courageous”<sup>38</sup>. As an adult,

---

<sup>31</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby...*, p. 82.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Dominczyk's Polish American does not entirely fit into the motion-picture making Hollywood machine that requires from the film stars to be perfectly slim and beautiful if one wants to bask in financial autonomy. Hence, Baran is given a piece of advice by her managers:

Get a trainer. If you can't afford one right now, we'll help you out, naturally. But you need to lose it, fast and furious. The point is, we support you, we believe in you. But we must do everything to get back to you. Starve yourself if you have to, I don't care.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of racialized power seems to lie behind the passage quoted above, and it is through the power over the bodies that the dominant and subordinate categories of people are differentiated<sup>40</sup>. Being disillusioned by the American reality and failing miserably as an actress as well as a partner, the protagonist yearns for the sense of rootedness, security and belonging, which can be provided only by her hometown, Kielce, and Poland in general. The return movement is also a feature that characterizes diasporas, which might result from the diasporic need to confront the imagined past<sup>41</sup>. Therefore, when she reaches a decision to return to her homeland, Anna realizes that "it doesn't feel like escape, it feels like survival [...] [and] going back to the beginning"<sup>42</sup>, as she confesses, is a necessary condition to reestablish herself. Anna remarks:

The stars in Poland are bright and sharp, as if torn from a connect-the dots coloring book. [...] In New York, the neon signs and tall buildings disturb the heavens [...] but not [in Poland] – here the grass looks and smells like grass, rampant and overgrown among the cracked stones that pave the sidewalks – it's not pretty, and it's a far cry from the well-manicured lawns in Brooklyn, but it's real.<sup>43</sup>

Poland is authentic, America is superficial; Poland is her home, her "private corner of the world"<sup>44</sup> as Baran defines it, her adopted homeland but it is also the place where she has a hard time looking people in the eyes. Even though, at times, one may reach a tentative conclusion that Dagmara Dominczyk tends to idealize the country of her origin when she describes Anna's experiences, such a statement is far from true. Being caught in the period of transition between 1989 and 2002, Poland that emerges in Dominczyk's novel and its inhabitants are not the least bit perfect. It is the country of "people who, despite being in [their] mid-thirties have no teeth"<sup>45</sup>, where "everyone smokes and laughs, but nobody smiles unless they

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. A. Brah, *Cartographies...*, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. R. Cohen, *Global...*, p. 185.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 29.



really mean it”<sup>46</sup>, “everyone [seems] dismal, hurried, and hungover”<sup>47</sup>, where “boys (with legs so skinny that it makes [one] sad, those giant knees, the narrator admits) and girls are alike – clad in polyester short shorts and open-toed sandals”<sup>48</sup>, the land where “no one has beds but *wersalkas* as there is simply no room for [people] in cramped Polish apartments”<sup>49</sup>. Dominczyk meticulously describes Polish national vices in-between the pages of her book and offers her readers snippets from the previous life.

The author becomes a true cartographer of Kielce and mentions The Relaks Café that “has become a clandestine meeting place for local drunks and for young men who aspire to be the next generation of local drunks”<sup>50</sup> emphasizing the fact that the local café is treated merely as a gathering ground because the aficionados of the bathtub-brewed moonshine and cheap wines do not buy any alcohol there, but bring with them their own bottles of intoxicating beverages. Dominczyk alludes also to the Tęcza Pool, “swarming with folks looking for relief, nobody is willowy; even the thin women give off a sense of largesse”<sup>51</sup> but “in the sea of shiny Slavic faces, no one wears sunglasses and no one cares about the fact that their swimwear looks decades old”<sup>52</sup>. Despite Poles being ugly, stingy, exposed to domestic violence<sup>53</sup>, and sometimes not well mannered (like a taxi driver who speeds off without saying ‘thank-you’ after being given a generous tip by Anna), the protagonist of the book honestly admits that “at the heart of everything [there] is the one thing that unites everyone: *przetrawanie* – survival”<sup>54</sup> and even the negative

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.87.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>53</sup> Dominczyk describes Justyna’s sister, who is frequently physically abused by her boyfriend. The author comments on Polish mentality and the silent ‘acceptance’ of domestic violence as follows: “Elwira’s boyfriend beat up on her. Not just a slap here and there, ‘cause God knows, she deserved that from time to time. I’m talking a black eye, cigarette burns, that kind of thing.” (D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby...*, p. 17.) The author also emphasizes Anna’s father’s inclination towards domestic violence, which may be justified by his severe depression. In one of the culminating parts of the novel Anna’s father suppresses his anger “[his] fists are clenched at his sides; his hands are purple” (Dominczyk, *The Lullaby ...*, p. 166.) and verbally abuses his wife stating “that’s what you get, *szmato*. Be glad God struck down the fucking tree and not you.” (D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby...*, p. 166). In a larger context, sociologists explain that the male status within the Polish (traditionally) patriarchal families was higher and strictly connected with Catholicism; it was father’s and husband’s “God-given right” to discipline children and women. More about position of women and obedience see in: I. T. Sanders, E. Morawska (1975), *Polish-American Community Life: Survey of Research*, Boston: Boston University, p. 155, and C. Golab (1980), *Stellaaaa.....!!!!!!: The Slavic Stereotype in American Film*, in: Miller, R.M. 1980 (ed.), *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*, Englewood, N.J.: Jerome S. Ozer, p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby...*, p. 89.

“thoughts [connected with Polish life style and hardships] fill [her] with affection”<sup>55</sup>. One may not deny the fact that, at times, Anna is bitterly disappointed with the behavior of Poles: she condemns her Polish peers’ lack of interest in literature (these are “guys who don’t read books or discuss current events”<sup>56</sup>), their lack of hygiene (in Anna’s eyes they have “corroded teeth and black fingernails”<sup>57</sup>), or the ease with which young boys are willing to discard their dreams in favour of “huddling around lampposts at all hours of the day, passing bottles of home brew around.”<sup>58</sup> However, the character cherishes the memory of the post-communist neighborhood solidarity; she remembers distributing her clothes and candy to the “beholden [...] children [claiming] that there was magic and power in it”<sup>59</sup>, and mourns over the mental transformation of Poles, which coincided with the change of the political system of the country. Dominczyk explains that the very same post-communist children, who used to be Anna’s playground buddies, have altered into neighborhood bums and now “make her cringe when she wave[s] hello [and] hurri[es] past them, feeling all kinds of sadness”<sup>60</sup>. Regardless of the visible Polish national vices, Polish misdemeanors, and the citizens’ considerable physical unattractiveness (even the cabin interior of the plane ‘smells Polish’, the narrative voice admits, i.e. “like *krakowska* ham, cheap floral eau de toilette, and sweat”<sup>61</sup>), the protagonist of the novel perceives Poles as “her people”<sup>62</sup> and senses “[the] old feeling, that old rupture, bursting in her heart”<sup>63</sup> when she visits the country of her forefathers. The above, multiple for the purposes of the present analysis, quotes from *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* are not romanticized visions of the ‘old country’ that Cohen alludes to in his *Global Diasporas*, but there is an extremely strong attachment to the past in Dominczyk’s book as well as the depiction of the obstacles in assimilation processes that the protagonist faces, which allows one to assume that a diasporic consciousness of the central character emerges.

There is a sense of nostalgia that permeates and pervades Dominczyk’s novel. First of all, *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* is grounded in the so-called “culinary nostalgia”<sup>64</sup>, using Anita Mannur’s expression; ethnic food ways have their place in

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>64</sup> More about culinary nostalgia in: S. Caputa (2016), *Kultura etniczna Polonii amerykańskiej i kulinarna nostalgia w twórczości amerykańskich autorów polskiego pochodzenia. Głos trzeciego pokolenia: proza Leslie Pietrzyk i Anthony’ego Bukoskiego*, in: Szałasta-Rogowska, B. (red.), *Literatura polska obu Ameryk. Studia i szkice*, seria druga, Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ, s. 215–226.

American ethnic literature and, as Fred Gardaphé and Wenying Xu observe, “food often has an ability to last longer as a signifier for ethnicity than other markers, such as language and fashion”<sup>65</sup>.

There exists a meaningful relationship between food and ethnicity because the “language of food offers a portal to ethnic history, culture and roots, [and] this language forms a gastronomic contact zone situated in cafes, kitchens, and homes where displaced individuals meet and reestablish identities”<sup>66</sup>. What is more, Ann Hetzel Gunkel maintains that, apart from playing a “significant role in the work of ethnic memory”<sup>67</sup>, food imagery serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the ethnic self in various literary contexts. In Dominczyk’s novel, Anna Baran brims with nostalgia reminiscing the smells and tastes of the Old Country, the character “sips the milky instant coffee – the same kind she drank in Poland with her *babcia* – which she buys for four bucks at a deli in Greenpoint”<sup>68</sup> stressing that “no Starbucks in the world could ever replace it”<sup>69</sup>, or makes frequent visits to Polish neighborhood “just to fill up on whiffs of *kielbasa* at butcher shops”<sup>70</sup>. The young Polish American feels perfectly at home when her grandmother prepares pierogi for her, which are drenched in onions and butter and allows her granddaughter to eat her special Polish delicacy “over the kitchen sink, straight out of the pot”<sup>71</sup>. Dominczyk also depicts the moments of pure bliss experienced by Anna, when she is being served a “plate of fried *schabowy* and sweet cabbage” by her grandmother and observes “the slow billowy dance of the lace curtains by the open balcony”<sup>72</sup> strongly believing that it is perfection and “this is her own personal Jesus”<sup>73</sup>.

Apart from the reliance on Polish food expressed in the character’s yearning for her home country, one may notice Anna’s adherence to Polish Catholic rituals, which help her in the moments of doubt. Even though Dominczyk’s protagonist is not overtly religious as an adult, she does wear the Polish Black Madonna medallion round her neck, which was given to her by her father during her youthful days, and “[doesn’t] say amen till the wheels [of the plane] touch the tarmac again.”<sup>74</sup> While clutching the medallion in her hand, every time she travels by plane to or

<sup>65</sup> F. Gardaphé, W. Xu (2007), Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures, “Melus,” Vol. 32, No. 4 (2007), p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> A. Hetzel Gunkel (2005), Of Polka, Pierogi and Ethnic Identity: Toward a Polish American Cultural Studies, *Polish-American Studies*, Vol. LXII, No. 1, p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby ...*, p. 55.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

from Poland, Anna contemplates the appalling ignorance of mainstream Americans about the country of her birth stating:

You mention Poland to an American and they think three things: *kielbasa*, the Pope, and Auschwitz, probably in that order. No one really gives a shit about [my] homeland.<sup>75</sup>

Anna embraces her Polish self and feels connected with the country of her ancestors fervently hoping that the better days are yet to come. Interestingly, at those very moments of claiming her Polish identity and visualizing her brighter future, the character alludes to Catholicism:

'*Lulajże Jezuniu*' is playing on the radio now and Anna hums along. It's a lullaby, sung to baby Jesus, and it's one of Anna's favorites. Growing up, Paulina would play the carol all day on Christmas and it always soothed Anna, reminding her that Mary had been just a mother once, trying to lull her restless child to sleep. Anna knows there will be babies, beautiful, healthy babies in the future, who will speak Polish, who will know where part of them came from. One day, she will forget the abortion.<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, one may claim that cultivating Polish Catholic rituals (e.g. singing Polish carols, sharing wafer on Christmas Eve with her family members, or decorating the Christmas tree) give the protagonist a sense of rootedness and are intertwined with her worldview.

Dagmara Dominczyk's novel is "about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial"<sup>77</sup>, the return to the Polish landscapes, smells, tastes and lifestyles of the late 1980s and early 1990s. *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* also depicts various aspects of diasporic consciousness: the protagonist of the novel to some extent idealizes her country of origin (at least as far as landscapes, food and Polish 'survival' instincts are concerned); as a teenager she accepts the normative codes of her Polish milieu and, as an adult, driven by the desire for safety Anna returns to Poland. Furthermore, the novel touches upon the problems of the character's troubled relationship with the host/American society and displays central character's solidarity with Polish friends. There is a high probability expressed in the book that Anna has found some kind of psychological closure thanks to her frequent trips to Poland and that the character will feel perfectly at home one day in the United States (the novel offers an open ending), but Anna Baran declares Poland as her home, her "social and psychic geography of space, [...] a place with which [she] remains intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it."<sup>78</sup> It may seem that Dominczyk's literary work is not so much about the immigrant homelessness of fictional

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>77</sup> S. Boym, *The Future...*, p. xvii.

<sup>78</sup> A. Brah, *Cartographies...*, p. 4.

Anna Baran, who yearns for belonging and finds solace in the crowd of Polish faces “set in frowns, wrinkled, [...] moon-shaped”<sup>79</sup>, but, maybe, the book is the tangible proof for the immigrant writer’s homelessness, who practices “a dual archeology of memory and of place, and a dual history of illusions and of actual practices”<sup>80</sup>, referring to Svetlana Boym’s words once again. One may even venture to reiterate that Dominczyk’s act of writing the novel itself allows the author to “make up a shelter [...] [because] sometimes writing can work toward a reparation, making a sheltering space for the mind”<sup>81</sup>, as it has been observed by Meena Alexander. Thus, *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* and the story of the trio of friends included in it might be interpreted as “the space for self-expression and dwelling that help anchor the identity [of the writer herself].”<sup>82</sup> Maybe it is Dagmara Dominczyk who is searching for rootedness as one of the members of Polish diaspora in the United States.

## References

- Apte, P., BookBrowse review. [https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book\\_number/2885/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls](https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/2885/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls) [Accessed: 27.05.2017].
- Booklist – starred review. <https://penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/220293/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls-by-dagmara-dominczyk/reading-guide> [Accessed: 28.11.2017].
- Boym S. (2002), Nostalgia i postkomunistyczna pamięć, in: Modrzejewski, F., Sznajderman, M. (red.), *Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, pp. 270–301.
- Boym S. (2001), *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books.
- Boym S. (2002), Nostalgia i postkomunistyczna pamięć, in: Modrzejewski, F., Sznajderman, M., (ed.) *Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, pp. 270–301.
- Brah, A. (1996), *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Boym S. (2002), Nostalgia i postkomunistyczna pamięć, in: Modrzejewski, F., Sznajderman, M. (red.), *Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, pp. 270–301.
- Caputa, S. (2016), Kultura etniczna Polonii amerykańskiej i kulinarna nostalgia w twórczości amerykańskich autorów polskiego pochodzenia. Głos trzeciego pokolenia: proza Leslie Pietrzyk i Anthony’ego Bukoskiego, in: Szałasta-Rogowska B. (ed.), *Literatura polska obu Ameryk. Studia i szkice*, seria druga, Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ, pp. 215–226.
- Cohen R. (1997), *Global Diasporas: An introduction*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Cutler, J., Dagmara Dominczyk: *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* – a review, NJ Advance Media, [http://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/index.ssf/2013/07/dagmara\\_dominczyk\\_the\\_lullaby\\_of\\_polish\\_girls.html](http://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/index.ssf/2013/07/dagmara_dominczyk_the_lullaby_of_polish_girls.html) [Accessed: 28.11.2017].

<sup>79</sup> D. Dominczyk, *The Lullaby ...*, p. 230.

<sup>80</sup> S. Boym, *The Future...*, p. xvii.

<sup>81</sup> M. Alexander as quoted in: Magdalena Zaborowska, *The Best View is from the Top: Autobiographical Snapshots, Communist Monuments, and (Post)Totalitarian Homelessness*, in: Shallcross, B. (2002) *Framing the Polish Home. Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 180.

<sup>82</sup> Sidonie Smith as quoted in: Magdalena Zaborowska, *The Best View is from the Top: Autobiographical Snapshots, Communist Monuments, and (Post)Totalitarian Homelessness*, in: Shallcross, *Framing the Polish Home...*, p. 179.

- Dagmara Dominczyk's biography. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0231436/bio> [Accessed: 28.11.2017].
- Dominczyk D. (2013), *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*, London: Quercus Editions Ltd.
- Gardaphé F, Xu W. (2007), *Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures*, "Melus," Vol. 32, No. 4 (2007), pp. 5–10.
- Golab, C. (1980), Stellaaaa.....!!!!: The Slavic Stereotype in American Film, in: Miller R.M. (ed.), *The Kaleidoscopic Lens, How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*, Englewood, NJ: Jerome S. Ozer, pp. 135–155.
- Hetzel Gunkel, A. (2005), Of Polka, Pierogi and Ethnic Identity: Toward a Polish American Cultural Studies, "Polish-American Studies," Vol. LXII, No. 1, pp. 29–42.
- Kozaczka, G. (2016), Writing Poland and America: Polish American Fiction in the Twenty-First Century, "Polish American Studies," Vol. LXXIII, No. 1, pp. 69–82.
- Library Journal, a review. <https://www.amazon.com/Lullaby-Polish-Girls-Random-Readers/dp/0812983823> [Accessed: 27.05.2017].
- Nolan, L., Review of "The Lullaby of the Polish Girls," Publisher Weekly, 2013. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-8129-93554> [Accessed: 28.11.2017].
- People, a review. <https://www.amazon.com/Lullaby-Polish-Girls-Random-Readers/dp/0812983823> [Accessed: 27.05.2017].
- Poornima Apte, BookBowse review. [https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book\\_number/2885/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls](https://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/2885/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls) [Accessed: 27.05.2017].
- Rubenstein R. (2001), *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Sanders, I. T., Morawska, E. T. (1975) *Polish-American Community Life: A Survey of Research*, Boston: Boston University.
- Schallcross B. (2002), Home Truths: Toward the Definition of the Polish Home, in: Schallcross B. (ed.), *Framing the Polish Home: Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, Athens: Ohio University Press, pp. 1–9.
- Shallcross, B. (2002) (ed.), *Framing the Polish Home. Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Trigiani, A., A review. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/220293/the-lullaby-of-polish-girls-by-dagmara-dominczyk/9780812983821/> [Accessed: 28.05.2017].
- Zaborowska M. (2002), The Best View is from the Top: Autobiographical Snapshots, Communist Monuments, and (Post)Totalitarian Homelessness, in: Shallcross, B. (ed.), *Framing the Polish Home. Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, Athens: Ohio University Press, pp. 179–215.