
Izabella Kimak and Mateusz Świetlicki
Ever since the beginning of migration of Eastern and Central Europeans to North America on a massive scale at the turn of the twentieth century, this group of newcomers faced the exclusionary nativist rhetoric, similarly to other ethnic groups before and after them—a rhetoric that posited them as the Other and a threat to the established communities (cf. Zecker; Sojka; Pula; Gladsky). Unlike immigrants of color, though, the subsequent generations of white Eastern Europeans could quickly assimilate (cf. Kostash). Yet, they risked losing their distinctive cultural heritage, especially considering the inaccessibility of their homelands during the Cold War. Sometimes, as was the case with Ukrainian Canadians, the new country, especially the prairie, started to function as a symbolic replacement of the old country, consequently bringing the question of the role of Eastern and Central Europeans not only as Others but also as colonizers of Indigenous lands (cf. Ledohowski; Świetlicki).

Naturally, over the last century or so, Eastern and Central European diasporas in North America underwent numerous transformations, most notably after the influx of post-World War II immigrants, and more recently, with new generations of Americans and Canadians of Eastern and Central European descent coming to the fore (cf. Bukowczyk; Drewniak; Grekul; Kulyk Keefer; Kozaczka; Satzewich; Suchacka; Suchacka and Lutz; Majewski; Zaborowska; Trzeszczynśka). Many young representatives of the diasporas have only a tangential relation to their heritage. Hence in their collective memory, the countries of their ancestors sometimes function as simulacra, imaginary lands bearing little resemblance to both past and contemporary Eastern Europe (cf. Świetlicki). The current war in Ukraine has already generated a new wave of refugees coming to North America in search of peace. Their presence is yet another thread in the complex
The tapestry that Eastern and Central Europeans have formed and continue to form in North America.

The aim of this collection is to demonstrate the various representations of Eastern and Central Europe in North America. The contributions by individual authors from Europe and the USA address the multi-faceted experiences of immigrants from the region in the US and Canada—both from a historical and contemporary perspective—in a variety of narrative forms created by diasporic and mainstream authors: novels, memoirs, graphic novels, and TV shows. The scholarly analyses that comprise the major part of this volume are followed by an interview with one US-American writer of Eastern European background who reflects on the struggles generated and the creative possibilities offered by one’s identity as an Eastern European American.

In “From Nostalgia to locus amoenus: Polish Migrants’ Memoirs in Canada and the Idea of Home, Identity and Belonging,” this volume’s opening article, Dagmara Drewniak studies Zwyczajna przeprowadzka / An Ordinary Move: Memoirs of Polish Immigrants (2014), a bilingual collection of verse and prose. In her sophisticated examination of this volume, Drewniak demonstrates the changing approaches of immigrants towards their understanding of home, belonging, and identity, while focusing on the collection’s transcultural character.

In her article titled “The Image of Central European Immigrant in Popular Fiction and Its Adaptations: A Case Study of the Detective Murdoch/Murdoch Mysteries Series,” Biljana Oklopcic discusses the use of ethnic stereotypes as a key component of genre writing, in this case crime fiction, as a starting point for her analysis of Central European immigration to Canada in the 19th century as represented in Maureen Jennings’s Detective Murdoch series. Jennings’ depictions are further juxtaposed with those present in the adaptation of the novels into a contemporary Canadian TV series Murdoch Mysteries (2008-), which broadens Jennings’ repertoire of mostly German immigrants to include male, female, and LGBTQ+ characters from the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The question of gender roles and stereotypes attributed to Eastern European women in the American imaginary is also explored in Martyna Bryla’s article “Gendered Geographies of the European East in the American Cold-War Literary Imaginary.” Studying texts by such Anglophone authors as Patricia Hampl, Eva Hoffman, Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Updike, Bryla argues that although they associate Eastern Europe with the figure of a man, either a conformist or a dissident, the way these authors present women exposes or questions Western fears and fantasies.

Mateusz Świetlicki, in his article titled “Trauma, Romance, and the Diasporic Memory Keepers of the Holodomor in Erin Litteken’s The Memory Keeper of Kyiv,” uses Litteken’s debut novel as a case study to demonstrate the validity of popular fiction, in this case trauma romance, to spread knowledge of historical events—here the Holodomor orchestrated by Stalin in Soviet Ukraine—that would otherwise be unknown to mainstream North American audiences. In his nuanced reading of the novel, Świetlicki points to the intergenerational transmission of trauma and signals the importance of bearing witness to the traumatic events the characters have experienced for the sake of their personal, familial, and collective well-being.

The links between Ukraine and North America are also explored in Marta Koval’s “Mosaic of History and Memory in Alexander Motyl’s Novel Fall River,” an article devoted to a family saga by Alexander Motyl, one of the best-known Ukrainian
American authors. Applying the theoretical background of memory studies, especially the work of Astrid Erll and Paul Connerton, Koval examines the role of remembering and forgetting in the lives of Motyl’s transcultural characters. Moreover, she skillfully demonstrates the potential of historical fiction set in Central and Eastern Europe in introducing American readers to the complexity of the ethnic dynamics in the region.

In an article titled “Nomadic Memory in Aleksandar Hemon’s Memoirs,” Rubén Peinado-Abarrio analyzes two recent memoirs by Bosnian-American author Aleksandar Hemon, My Parents: An Introduction and This Does Not Belong to You, published in 2019 in one volume. Contextualizing Hemon’s non-fiction within the notion of nomadic memory articulated by posthumanist thinker Rosi Braidotti, Peinado-Abarrio convincingly argues that Hemon’s memoirs are instances of remembering in a minority-mode. Using real events from his family’s life, especially the forced migration of his parents from war-torn Bosnia, Hemon construes a migrant as a subject-in-becoming affected by the complex workings of non-linear and transgenerational memory.

The transgenerational and transcultural dimensions of memory are also explored in Anastasia Ulanowicz’s article entitled “Traumatic Peregrinations: Intergenerational Memory and Migration in Nina Bunjevac’s Fatherland.” Ulanowicz uses Astrid Erll’s concept of “travelling memory” in her examination of the intergenerational movement of traumatic memories in Nina Bunjevac’s graphic novel Fatherland: A Family History (2014), a multimodal narrative based on the author’s father’s collaboration with Serbian nationalists and its impact on his family’s three generations.

Alexandra Glavanakova presents partial results of her wider research into representations of Bulgaria in US-American culture in an essay titled “Migrating Literatures: Bulgaria in the American Imaginary.” Using the example of four novels—two by Elizabeth Kostova and two by Garth Greenwell—Glavanakova corroborates her major claim that a substantial part of American literary and cinematographic references to Bulgaria can be argued to subscribe to the discourse which she terms, following other scholars, Balkanism – as a problematization of Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism. Glavanakova shows how Bulgaria functions in the texts under study as the Other not only of the US, but also of Western Europe.

Annika M. Schadewaldt turns her scholarly gaze upon Vladimir Nabokov’s novel Pnin in her article titled “Imitation, Mimicry, and the Performance of Americanness in Nabokov’ Pnin.” The author draws attention to Nabokov’s well studied interest in science to show how mimicry and imitation are deployed within the narrative logic of Pnin to indicate the precarious position of an Eastern European migrant in the United States, given the impossibility of Russian émigré Pnin’s perfect performance of Americanness.

Finally, in his conversation with Izabella Kimak, Polish American writer John Z. Guzlowski reminisces about his growing up in the area of Humboldt Park in Chicago as a child of immigrants from Poland who had entered the United States as Displaced Persons in 1951. Guzlowski repeatedly uses the WW2 experiences of his parents and their subsequent life as immigrants in the US as literary material for his poetry and prose. The interview centers on questions of what it means to be a Pole—and a Polish American writer—in the contemporary US.
Taken all together, the texts create a complex tapestry of narratives of Eastern and Central European presence in North America, one whose diversity points to the complex histories of various groups that share not only Eastern/Central European origin but also a common interest in questions of memory, identity, and belonging.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Izabella Kimak is an Assistant Professor at the Department of British and American Studies at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. Her research interests encompass contemporary American literature, with particular emphasis on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. She is the author of Bicultural Bodies: A Study of South Asian American Women’s Literature (Peter Lang, 2013) and numerous scholarly articles as well as a co-editor of several volumes and special issues on contemporary American literature and culture. She is an elected representative of the Polish Association for American Studies to the European Association for American Studies and a member of the editorial board of Polish Journal for American Studies. A Kosciuszkko Foundation fellow and a recipient of the Polish National Science Center research grant for the project “Sweet Home Chicago: The Windy City and American Writers of Polish Descent.”

MATEUSZ ŚWIETLICKI

Mateusz Świetlicki is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wrocław’s Institute of English Studies (Poland), Director of the Center for Young People’s Literature and Culture, and Deputy Dean for Student Affairs at the Faculty of Letters. His most-recent book, Next-Generation Memory and Ukrainian Canadian Children’s Historical Fiction: The Seeds of Memory (Routledge, 2023), examines the transnational entanglements of Canada and Ukraine. He has recently co-edited Navigating Children’s Literature through Controversy: Global and Transnational Perspectives (Brill, 2023, with Elżbieta Jamróz-Stolarska and Agata Zarzycka) and a special issue of Bookbird: A Journal of International Children’s Literature titled War and Displacement in Children’s Literature (2023, with Chrysogonus Siddha Malilang). Świetlicki was a Research Scholar at the University of Florida’s Department of English (Kosciuszko Foundation Fellowship), a Fulbright scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago (2018), a visiting scholar at the University of Toronto (2022), and has held multiple other fellowships (Munich, Kyiv, Harvard). He is the deputy editor-in-chief of Filoteknos, a member of the editorial team of John Benjamins Publishing’s “Children’s Literature, Culture, and Cognition” series, and a representative of the Childhood & Youth Network of the Social Science History Association.