

DAGMARA DREWNIAK

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

## From Poland to Canada: Memories of Communist Poland and Migration to Canada in Three Texts by Polish-Born Women Writers\*

Polish-born Canadian writers whose migration took place in the 1980s and early 1990s have been shaped by the experience of Communism and its decline. The period of poverty and hopelessness-stricken Poland has had a great influence on their identities and memories. It is therefore without question that Aga Maksimowska, Kasia Jaronczyk and Liliana Arkuszewska, whose narratives will be discussed in this article, delve into the time of Communist oppression as a major factor shaping their cultural codes. Also, their memories of childhood and early adulthood have triggered their transitional narratives which refer to the Communist times in Poland and emigration overseas. All three writers left their homeland and pursued *émigré* lives and careers in Canada in professions different than literature. Aga Maksimowska, born in the 1970s, a graduate from Ryerson University, came to Canada in 1988 as an 11-year-old girl, completed her education in Toronto and has become a school teacher. Kasia Jaronczyk also arrived in Canada in her youth in 1992, obtained degrees in microbiology and English, and now lives in Guelph, where she focuses on writing and her family. Liliana Arkuszewska, born in the 1950s in Poland, emigrated via Paris to Ottawa, Canada in 1982, and works as a graphic designer and telecommunication

\* This work was supported by the Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) under Grant UMO-2017/27/B/HS2/00111.

specialist. In the meantime, they all decided to confront their migrant experiences in different forms of literary expression. As a result, their debut texts are concerned with variegated identity questions and immigrant conditions. Maksimowska's first and only novel to date, *Giant*, was published in Canada in 2012. The book, devoted to a young teenage girl's difficult transition from Poland to Canada, was soon among the finalists for the Toronto Book Awards, which was a great success. *Lemons* (2017) by Kasia Jaronczyk, also a debut volume, is a collection of linked short stories divided into two parts, "Girls" and "Women," both of which show the grim Polish reality of Communism and the loneliness of Canada-based migrants. Arkuszewska's *Was It Worth It? Columbus in Jeans* (2019), an English translation of its Polish version published in 2012 as *Czy było warto? Odyseja dżinsowych Kolumbów*, is about an escape from Communism to the free West and a clash with the imagined Promised Land. Written in three different conventions, Maksimowska's novel, Jaronczyk's short story cycle and Arkuszewska's autobiographical narrative, aptly and interestingly deal with the migrants' formative memories, doubts and dilemmas they had to face in exile. Since "[a]rtistic works operate at the level of the individual" (Brownlie 9), these texts providing the readers with varied portrayals of migration, offer insight into specific situations seen from particular spatial and temporal perspectives. These narratives, I argue, demonstrate the influence of roots and memories on the lives of Polish migrants in Canada, exemplify their problems, as well as offer fascinating ways of coping with migrants' condition.

Displacement experienced by immigrants and the transnational condition of a diasporic writer (and protagonist) call for a particular analysis contextualized within the diaspora studies. Vijay Agnew emphasizes that, while it is unnecessary to distinguish all features attributed to diasporic writers nowadays, it is important to look for a "shared history of displacement" (4). In the case of the authors and their texts discussed below, it is the experience of Communism together with its regime of power, freedom deficiency, various forms of loneliness as well as goods shortages that shaped the early lives and decisions of the protagonists and their relatives in the 1980s and 1990s Poland. As a country of immigrants, Canada has offered space for the Polish diaspora to live their lives in liberty no matter how complex the processes of identity formation may be. In her recent study on Polish-North American texts, Grażyna J. Kozaczka acknowledges the fact that in the twenty-first century

[f]or the first time, fiction by Polish immigrant and migrant women authors turns away from the nineteenth-century romantic view of Polish immigration ... Gone are nostalgia and pining for the lost Polish

homeland. ... these new (im)migrant women do not engage in recreating the Polish homeland abroad. ... Their lack of emotional attachment to Poland or to any of their transitional immigrant homelands permits mobility and thus opens opportunities for financial and social advancement. (152–153)

Such findings are in agreement with contemporary diasporic studies emphasizing that “homing desire” is not synonymous with the “desire for a homeland” or a previously dominant “ideology of return” (Brah 180). As Avtar Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora* asserts, the latter is no longer a typical pattern. In the age of mass migrancy and traveling, the emphasis is frequently placed on the dynamic and changing concept of home privileging localities, which new homelands can offer. It has to be noted that migrants move in two directions: horizontal and vertical (Moslund 2010). Their trajectories should not be analyzed only from the perspective of relocation from place to place but also within the space and time paradigm (Moslund 2010, Nail 2015). Thus, contemporary migrations are frequently linked with what the migrants bring with them from the past and how their stay evolves in time. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, migration has often been linked not with a dissident type of exile but rather with a voluntary decision to change location. In Communist Poland, this usually meant one-way travel, but in all the cases depicted here the protagonists (or their parents) emigrated for economic reasons and their migratory experiences brought about “the sites of hope and new beginnings” (Brah 193). These newly formed desires and hopes accompany all characters and lead to the formation of new identities informed by their Polish past and Canadian experience.

Both diasporic and migration studies are closely linked with home, family and memory studies. According to Femke Stock, in diasporic groups “the notion of home is referred to and employed in diverging, sometimes contradictory ways” (25), which include contestation of the place of residence as well as feeling at home in the new country. This dynamic potential of diasporas is also alluded to by Pnina Werbner, who postulates to call contemporary diasporic groups “complex diasporas,” which develop “*chaordically*—wherever they settle: they are *both* hybrid *and* heterogeneous in their own peculiar, historically determined, ways” (74, emphasis original). Furthermore, in his text titled “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall emphasizes that “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context,’ *positioned*” (234, emphasis original). The narratives analyzed here are also written from

a particular perspective and bring into the foreground not only the migration processes but, most of all, the remembered past, which shapes the writers' and protagonists' families, memories and outlooks on their migrant and diasporic experiences.

Furthermore, following the findings of Maurice Halbwachs, Astrid Erll asserts that family is a fundamental component of the social framework and, as such, becomes a form of collective memory offering a firm link between "the individual memory and larger formations of collective memory" (308). Moreover, the "re-narration" of the past from generation to generation shapes the foundational perspective and becomes the "arena in which the particularizing and universalizing dynamics of global, cosmopolitan memory [is] played out" (Erll 312, 315). Family memories are, thus, not only stored in the private catalogues of stories, but more and more frequently become the bases for narratives that speak for (and from) the diaspora. As a result, autobiographical narratives, semi-autobiographical texts, and novels loosely inspired by the authors' lives contribute to the understanding of particular diasporic groups living far away from their home countries and who have found their homelands elsewhere. The narratives of individuals as well as texts portraying the whole families try to render the contemporary vistas of multifaceted migration processes and diasporas.

Since "family memory is a subset of autobiographical memory" (Shore and Kauko 87) and "individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory" (Halbwachs 53 qtd. in Shore and Kauko 88), the authors' and protagonists' memories included in the immigrant stories to be discussed below offer significant insights into the Polish migrant group in Canada and their attitudes towards the old and new homelands. In the light of the aforementioned statement by Hall, it has to be added that Avtar Brah sees similar meaning in the past claiming that

diasporic journeys ... must be historicized if the concept of diaspora is to serve as a useful heuristic device. The question is not simply about *who travels* but *when, how, and under what circumstances?* What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions make the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora? (182, emphasis original)

Therefore, for the characters in the selected narratives, it is Communist Poland which informs their concepts of self-identification as well as their understanding of the Western ideas of liberty and independence. The dyad of history and the

present time provides a foundation for the perception of themselves in Canada as Poles with a certain baggage of the past. If “places [among other concepts] are well-known cognitive anchors for family memory” (Shore and Kauko 96), then it is predominantly Communist Poland juxtaposed with Canada, which together offer an organizational axis for the migrant identities of the protagonists of the selected narratives.

*Giant* is a novel in which the narrator, 11-year-old Gosia Wasiljewska, along with her sister, immigrate to Canada in 1988, where their mother has already been staying for two years. Gosia is also the titular giant, an overdeveloped teenager who struggles not only with the sense of being uprooted, longing for her grandparents left in Poland, but also with her body. The novel is divided into two parts: the first, in which we meet the heroine in her hometown of Gdańsk, and the second, which largely concerns the period of emigration and the first years spent in Toronto. One of Canada’s better-known literary critics, Philip Marchand, points out that the text is “an example of a Canadian immigrant novel, or the coming of age novel or the tale of feminist empowerment” (2012). By incorporating elements of magical realism in the form of Gosia’s overgrown body, it also broadens the idea of an immigrant novel as defined by Boelhower (1981).

In the part of the book that deals with life in Poland, we observe Maksimowska’s protagonist struggling with many difficult experiences. First of all, Gosia and her sister are separated from their mother. The sisters stay with their grandparents, who, despite their commitment, are not able to replace their parents. What is more, Gosia is forced to negotiate her identity within the conflicting attitudes of Grandpa and Grandma, with whom she lives. Grandpa, as a former member of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) and a Communist, provides the family with a relatively comfortable existence in the 1980s, while Grandma, through her religiousness, tries to instill the norms presented by Pope John Paul II and the Catholic Church. Gosia openly admits that her Communist grandfather:

goes to church sometimes. Yes, he has to wear a wide-brimmed hat and stand outside in the churchyard during most services. But he participates, waving assorted tree branches on Palm Sunday and blessing hard-boiled eggs on Easter Saturday, allowing black dust to be deposited on his bald spot on Ash Wednesday and seeing Jesus born at Midnight Mass. It’s true: he doesn’t do Catholic parades—no Corpus Christi marches in June, or Stations of the Cross on Good Friday—only Party parades are acceptable. (Maksimowska 17–18)

The protagonist, observing the contradictory messages sent by family members, does not know what attitude she should adopt to religion and her surrounding reality. Born on August 15, a Catholic holiday, she wonders if she can celebrate it solemnly. Her grandmother also offers stories about how Communists murdered priests (Maksimowska 18), while her Mom presents a contrasting view by telling her, that “Religion is the opiate of the masses” (17). Similar dilemmas arise in relation to Gosia’s doubts about their neighbors. The Wasiljewskis struggle with the stigma of being of Russian origin because of the sound of their surname (Grandpa even wants to remove the name plate from the door), and yet the grandparents speak negatively about the other neighbors, the Brechts, who do not write the letters K + M + B, symbolizing Christianity, on the door, and are therefore “heretics ... Jews” (Maksimowska 21).

What is more, the aforementioned problems with her overdeveloped body cause Gosia to feel a victim of her own corporeality, over which she has no control. This manifests itself in stomach problems, for example when she meets her father, who buys her ice cream, and in disgust with her own body naked or in a bathing suit on the beaches surrounding Gdańsk. Gosia perceives her body as a source of shame and disgust, the shape of which together with its fluids can be located within Julia Kristeva’s abject. As the critic claims, “it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). The effects experienced by Gosia, such as torpor and diarrhea, along with limp joints and an overdeveloped body, condemn her to metaphorical death in her own eyes, as well as in the eyes of her peers, and situate her at the centre of Kristeva’s “powers of horror” and abjection. At such moments she longs for her mother and her soothing touch. The school nurse, who evaluates the physical development of the children by examining their naked bodies and noting down her observations in the health chart, is also critical about Gosia’s body. Moreover, as a daughter, she feels betrayed by her parents’ divorce (“All fathers on this floor work at sea ... Ours is the only divorcé” [Maksimowska 20]) and the decision of her mother, who, as Gosia comes to realize after some time, has left for Canada permanently with no intention of returning to Poland. In addition, both sisters are called “*Ruski*” at school (Maksimowska 73, emphasis original). This perspective of strangeness and being an outcast makes Gosia genuinely distraught when, in addition to disgust, revulsion and nausea, there appears abdominal pain associated with her first menstruation while at the beach. Gosia repeatedly says: “I’ve been ripped apart. I’m dying because I miss Mama too much. My stupid monstrous body is breaking down” (Maksimowska 59), calling herself a “giant fucking freak!” (Maksimowska 34).

Finally, the sisters join their mother in Canada. Gosia's visions of a long-haired, famous mother teaching at school are quite brutally confronted with reality when, shortly after her arrival, it turns out that her mother has a short, manly haircut because it is practical as she cleans houses. She has a partner whom she intends to marry, too. A sense of alienation also dominates Gosia's contacts with her classmates. Not knowing the language, she finds it difficult to make friends, and her physique is a source of ridicule. Moreover, her background arouses resentment from some of her peers who perceive her as anti-Semite and even a Nazi (Maksimowska 119). She has to deal with the total misunderstanding of her status and identity as a Pole and simultaneously tries to become more Canadian in order to merge into the society. The profound lack of being understood and accepted results, as Ewa Bodal signals, from

the extreme ignorance of the Canadians about Poland and its war-time history. Significantly, such remarks are made not only by people belonging to the white majority, but also by Canadians coming from, for example, Trinidad, and therefore by people who may have more understanding of marginalization or misrepresentation. (155)

This, in turn, leads to the above-mentioned conviction, voiced by Brah and Hall, that diasporic characters speak from a particular space which cannot be overlooked and neglected but is not necessarily easily comprehended worldwide.

Unfortunately, to the protagonist's despair, the only person showing any real interest in the country she comes from is her history teacher, Mr. Pantin, who wants Gosia to deliver a report in class on the 1989 fall of Communism. He not only asks the girl about the meaning of the word Solidarity, but also presses her to elaborate on the sense of freedom, the victory over Communism and the opportunities for all of Central and Eastern Europe that this breakthrough brings. Gosia is horrified because she hates being reminded of her roots, she wants to blend in with the Canadian society and during this lesson the teacher even makes her say a few words in Polish. Then the protagonist, satisfying the teacher's curiosity about the difficult pronunciation of the trade union's name, thinks at the same time: "I wish we could stop talking about Poland and go back to slavery, or the Civil Rights Movement, the Iroquois Confederacy, or long-houses, canoes, or finally start Wolfe and Cartier, for Christ's sake. Something more normal, something more Canadian, something that would let me blend into this library, like my classmates do" (Maksimowska 139). For the character, the desire to call Canada her home and to identify with it is an extremely important factor of settling in. She, however, learns that "it is through social

interactions that children realize the perspectival nature of memories” (de Saint Laurent and Zittoun, 214), which is one of the reasons why she cannot adapt and assimilate easily. Canada becomes her whole world, even though she is still connected with her grandparents’ homeland through her memories and affects. The protagonist, however, does not want to stand out, she does not want to be different and she fears that her Polishness stigmatizes her, which is a kind of paradox in her new multicultural homeland. Paradoxically, Gosia wants to be an immigrant like other Canadian migrants and quickly fuses into the Canadian society. In order to become one, she tries to befriend other migrants and in between cultures she seeks asylum and the opportunity to remain invisible.

This sense of gradual and troubled blending into Canadian society allows the protagonist, despite many difficulties, to decide about herself. The surgery on her joints, preventing her from further growing, is only possible when Gosia reaches maturity. She decides to enroll at the University of British Columbia, in Canada’s westernmost province, and her excitement about going west is contained in three words: “university, independence, the Pacific Ocean” (Maksimowska 207). The symbolic trip west, as far away from Poland as possible and from Toronto, where her mother is staying, allows Gosia to think about a future in Canada. Moreover, the reader sees that her decisions are made very consciously, when she rejects the dominance of her Polish past over herself:

On that first and last trip to Gdańsk I decided that forgetting was what would allow me to cope ... Forgetting Polish made my English better, more effortless. Forgetting Beata made my middle-school friendship with Althea immediate, necessary, firm. You can’t have your feet in two different places: one in Poland, one in Canada, because that’s a massive step that will likely rip you in two. You have to pick one, forget the other. If you do that, you won’t miss what you’ve left. (Maksimowska 208)

For the protagonist, the only available way to cope with her migrant experience is to suppress her Polish past, get rid of both grim Communist memories as well as distance herself from her grandparents’ impact. This would become feasible after their death when the whole process of uprooting and re-rooting herself in Canada appeared viable. While moving to Vancouver, Gosia tries to invalidate her oppressive memory. She also attempts to quench her Polishness and her previous identity of a girl who has escaped the Communist regime, both of which have been the most important characteristics through which everybody perceived Gosia. Andrew J. Borkowski notes that the novel’s protagonist is “an apt metaphor for the immigrant psychology, and for the coming-into-awareness



of a misunderstood nation” (2018). Thus, Gosia’s maturation can be viewed as a plea for acceptance, and her decision to separate from her family indicates her desire to live on her own, guided by her choices.

At the center of Kasia Jaronczyk’s cycle of interconnected short stories entitled *Lemons* (2017) is Basia, whose life, like a mirror, reflects the reality of Communist and post-Communist Poland. Although the “Polish” stories seem to dominate the volume quantitatively, they provide insight into the protagonist’s psyche and experiences, which helps the reader understand her depressing situation in the Canadian part of the volume. Basia’s childhood follows a dark pattern and reflects the experiences of many children living in similar conditions during the Communist era. In her volume, Jaronczyk refers to certain social and gender roles prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s and tries to expose inequality and oppressive relationships induced by Communist regimes of power and old-fashioned upbringing standards.

From the very beginning, the readers get to know Basia and her teenage friends from primary school and the estate she lives in. In the first story titled “Lemons,” the general characteristic of power relations and gender roles is provided by the young narrator:

Our dads spank us. This is what they do. They hit us and sometimes they take us to the movies or to fairs and amusement parks. Mothers do shopping, peel potatoes and cook all day. Fathers work. Our mothers stand gossiping in front of the apartment building, their shopping bags and arms tethering them to the ground like tents until our fathers send us to bring them home. Our dads are hungry. (Jaronczyk 14)

Although the fathers show concern and take care of the children from time to time, Jaronczyk here presents a traditional division of social roles. There are of course children who have more loving parents, but they are rare in Basia’s world. For example, the father of her friend Natalia does not shout at her or beat her because he is an opera artist and is careful about his voice. Moreover, the presented situation does not prove that bad fathers and inequality exist only in Communist-ruled societies but illustrates the grim visions and memories from pre-1989 Poland. The most riveting experience in the girl’s life depicted in the story “Portrait” is her interaction with her grandfather. On the one hand, the grandfather is presented as someone who brings gifts and wants to paint Basia’s portrait (he is an amateur painter artist), and on the other hand, he yells at her and her brother when they play too loudly, and he also beats her, ordering her to undress first, which the girl remembers as humiliation. A similar situation

occurs when Basia is asked to pose for her grandfather's portrait, which ends in sexual harassment and forcing the granddaughter to stand naked. We do not learn exactly what happened during the posing, though we do learn about kisses on the lips, touching and hugging. The memories dominate her life and are said to have influenced both her psyche and physical condition and determine the protagonist's marriage, illness, and happiness. According to de Saint Laurent and Zittoun, this foundational aspect of memory is very significant "as people move through life, the meeting of new others will also convoke autobiographical memories: To fulfill their relational function, memories are quite likely to be revisited every time people establish new significant relationships—friends, partners, and children" (24).

Basia's mother wants her to be polite first and foremost, not to upset her grandfather and to submit to his commands, as one should always listen to one's elders and be properly invisible. The conviction that children should remain always subjected to older members of the family and be deprived of their own say was typical of the Communist pedagogy and upbringing. It is the adults, her mother, who are impatient with Basia's questions and deaf to all signs of her daughter's dignity having been violated, and the father who uses a belt, or the grandfather who orders her to undress for punishment and oversteps the limits of his granddaughter's intimacy, who are supposed to know better at all times. This traditional way excludes any friendship and trust between parents and their children, and, thus, makes it virtually impossible to protect their kids from any forms of abuse.

Since her mother is a teacher at school and works in summer camps, Basia is obliged to live up to her mother's demands, and not to interfere with her career as an ideologically committed tutor. Although the daughter admits that she loves her mother immensely and loves to cuddle with her, she gets upset easily and screams at her daughter. The event that sinks deeply into the girl's memory happens when Basia unexpectedly gets sick and destroys her mother's dress, which makes her furious. After this incident, Basia "never threw up again. If vomit filled her mouth, she swallowed it" (Jaronczyk 20), which indicates the inability to express oneself or be oneself, even in difficult moments and in front of the closest person, but also the necessity to physically internalize the problems. This shameful incident together with the earlier abuse from her father and grandfather make Basia feel disgust towards her own body. Again, as in the case of Maksimowska's Gosia, the protagonist of *Lemons* internalizes her fear, shame, and thinks about her girlhood and then womanhood with repugnance. Similarly to Gosia's abjection, Basia also feels disgust in the presence of her mother's bossy voice that chooses what is best to eat, drink, dress, and

think for her. Similarly to the situation described by Kristeva, which may be Basia's manifesto:

*nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. 'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself out*, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*'. (3, emphasis original)

Although it is impossible to eradicate the memory of shame and disgust, as they will take a toll on Basia's body and mind in the future life, Basia has to build her self-identification on this experience. Forgetfulness would be ideally the best solution for Basia and Gosia. It is, however, absolutely unavailable, as "associated with bodily processes and substances—such as tears, saliva, feces, and vomit—the abject is defiling and disgusting and yet, because it is part of the self and body cannot be fully rejected" (Bousoin 113). Thus, all the grim memories of the past together with the painful and shameful abuse will influence Basia's future life as a woman suffering from serious bodily dysfunctions.

In "The Pet," in turn, Basia was to recite a poem at a school concert. Originally, her mother allowed her to stay home after her indisposition, even though her symptoms had subsided, but after a few hours at work, she returns and takes Basia to the performance. Despite the daughter's objections that she has not been to school in the morning and is not well prepared for the recitation, her mother is adamant and orders her to perform in front of Communist dignitaries "to celebrate the Leader's birthday with us" (Jaronczyk 20). At the moment, Basia dreams about her father who "left [her] for the American dream" (Jaronczyk 25) as he would "let [her] stay at home" (Jaronczyk 21). In this oppressive dichotomy, between an unfeeling mother and an often unkind and absent father, Basia in her loneliness can only hide her head under the pillow and escape with her thoughts. Another example can be found in "Epidemic (Director's Cut)," a story in which we see Basia at a summer camp where her mother is a tutor. As a result, Basia's trip is gratuitous, but not necessarily pleasant, as it is her mother who selects her friends, taking away her daughter's hope of having some privacy and striking a real friendship like the one depicted in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, her favourite book. An unfortunate friendship with a girl imposed on her by her mother, her first loves, as well as an unpleasant incident involving head lice, and the constant interventions of her mother-teacher, made her stay at camp a torture. The trope of the Communist summer camps

providing children with diversion and fresh air is a frequent motif in many books on childhood spent in Poland or other Communist countries. Although such occasions frequently offered children a chance to spend some time in the open, they simultaneously instilled Communist values into the participants.

Some of the stories from *Lemons* take place in Canada as well. In these fragments we can see Basia, who is no longer the main character, but returns in “Muse,” for example, with her difficult dilemmas. As a graduate in physiology, she is aware of her illness and the limitations resulting from her *myasthenia gravis*. The causes of this illness are unknown and may be attributed to stress and trauma from the past. An accidental meeting on a bus with a young girl, a mother of two, makes Basia wonder if she will ever have children of her own, although she realizes that due to the disease and the medications she is taking, this will be extremely difficult. A conversation about pregnancy and children ensues, as the girl misjudges Basia’s obesity for pregnancy rather than induced by *myasthenia gravis* treatment. Jaronczyk’s character describes her illness as “the body attacking itself” (114), which turns Basia into a victim of her own corporeality and the disease that has wreaked havoc on her body. The result is a lack of conduction of “signals ... from nerves to muscles” (Jaronczyk 114), which to a large extent immobilizes her at home. She also talks about her supportive and understanding husband, but realizes that she is a person, a woman, who has “a brain but no body” (Jaronczyk 114). This attitude to the body, in Basia’s case resulting from her illness, is symptomatic of other female characters in *Lemons*. But, if we read Basia’s illness as her body’s reaction to the violence of her childhood, connected to abuse and the abject, to the harrowing experience of Communist Poland and the first years after the breakthrough, then Canada appears as a safe haven, away from a disturbing and traumatic past. As she herself says in the text, she tried to plan many things in her life; only her illness could not be included in these plans. In spite of that, Basia tries to face the reality day by day and delight in small things, like flowers in front of the houses or the books she reads with great pleasure.

Liliana Arkuszewska’s *Was It Worth It? Columbus in Jeans* (2019) was published in Canada five years after its Polish edition. This is quite unusual as the aforementioned writers as well as many others living in Canada first try to find their place in a Canadian publishing market and only then search for opportunities to have their texts translated into Polish. In this case, Arkuszewska was encouraged to approach a Canadian publishing house by friends, Polish language readers and reviewers who praised her debut. This typical immigration novel, according to Boelhower’s definition (1981), describes the 1980s wave of migration from Poland to Canada, although the Arkuszewskis were not Solidarity activists

and they emphasized the economic reasons for emigration over purely political ones. The story included in the book is autobiographical, which the author acknowledges in “From the author” and “Introduction” (ix–xiii) and describes her family’s growing frustration in Poland under Communist governments, their decision to emigrate and its realization as well as the years following the moment they left Poland. In terms of the genre and the autobiographical “I” present in the story, it is different from *Giant* and *Lemons*, but its inclusion in the current study is justified by the time of its publication as well as the presence of clear and direct references to the transition from the Communist Poland to the free Canada. The Arkuszewskis spent the initial months in Paris in the émigré circles while waiting for their visas to enter Canada. The narrative provides detailed depictions of the ups and downs in this land of plenty in an adventurous style upon the family’s arrival in Ottawa. The family had to virtually start their lives anew, find jobs, change their qualifications numerous times, settle their small daughter in a kindergarten, and, first and foremost, learn English. Supported by a limited group of good friends, they managed to start functioning thanks to other Polish migrants in Canada, their own resourcefulness and immense urge to break free from Communist and poverty-stricken Poland.

Throughout the whole autobiography, Arkuszewska recalls Poland as a grey and poor country where getting any goods requires standing in long queues and constant inventiveness. This is intensified when Arkuszewska visits her parents in Peru. They have stayed there for a longer period as a result of the father’s trade contract. Arkuszewska decided to fly to them for vacation, leaving her husband and little daughter behind. The amount of goods available everywhere, beauty of nature, and open and happy people made her think about emigration more seriously, although at this moment she still tried to defend the decision to stay in Poland. The friends she became acquainted with claimed:

in a Communist country you’ll never have this kind of possibilities you have here in the West. ... Remember how I told you about Canada? ... Canada really is a country of possibilities, and what’s more, it’s a country of immigrants. You wouldn’t feel out of place there. The standard of living is impressive. (Arkuszewska 90)

Such and similar discussions were common among those whom she met in Peru. Some of these people spent years in Canada and recommended this country with all their hearts offering contacts to their friends and relatives in Toronto, Ottawa and other towns. Initially, the Arkuszewskis are against such a big change as Andrzej is about to finish his PhD project in Szczecin, where

they live and Liliana is happy about the chances to build their own house on a small plot of land they managed to secure from the institute Andrzej works for. Moreover, they have just received a permit to move to a bigger apartment in a dormitory, as they lived for a few years with their child in one room. Kozaczka also mentions the fact that they can function quite well in Poland thanks to their ability to “willingly and remorselessly break the laws of several European countries by engaging in smuggling operations” (139). These acts supplementing their everyday budget were not enough for their family members who managed to see what it is like to live in the West. Moreover, the internal situation in Poland was also degrading and people were becoming more impoverished by the day. Arkuszewska’s book is also a story narrating the experiences of many economic emigrants from Communist Poland who at least once in their lives managed to see what it is like to live in the West. Such people, who, owing usually to their professional duties, “tasted” the richness and freedom of the life behind the Iron Curtain, could not forget the experience and pursued the dream of emigration ever since.

However, during one of the “hunting expeditions” to get butter when Arkuszewska spent three hours in a line in front of the shop, she decided to emigrate. In the book, there are also other funny and dramatic reports from empty shops, endless queues and abnormal feats of joy after managing to buy toilet paper, a tin of fish or washing powder (Arkuszewska 114–115). Despite her parents’ stay in Poland, Arkuszewska with her family as well as her sister’s family makes a final decision to leave Poland forever. After long preparations, their passport applications are finally accepted and they leave for France. On numerous occasions throughout the narrative, Arkuszewska comes back to these grim visions of Poland, pitying her parents being forced to “a tiny little flat, to empty store shelves, to lines, to rations cards for sugar and meat. And, on the top of all that, for sure to problems that we’d made for them by our escaping to the West” (Arkuszewska 266). She sees her decision to emigrate only in the economic contexts and even admits she never feels nostalgic about Poland. Paradoxically, such emotions are alien to her while experiencing serious problems with finding jobs, being fired, changing qualifications and taking up jobs below her competences in Canada. She convinces her readers that she has “finished the chapter entitled Poland. It’s done. The last page has been turned” and she gets “sentimental at times, but is that longing? Is that homesickness? [she] suppose[s] ... there is no room for those emotions” (Arkuszewska 271). After 1989, the Arkuszewskis visit Poland to spend some time with their relatives and bring their daughter to their original homeland. Unfortunately, despite some changes such as new buildings, renovations and plenty of goods in shops, Liliana

is deeply disappointed by the sadness in people's eyes, rude shop assistants and dirt in the streets. She even concludes: "I didn't feel at home here. How can I find my sea-legs in this country? Everything was mixed up, at odds" (Arkuszevska 404). For her, Poland will always remain overshadowed by Communism and affected by its consequences. These would not only concern her hated and never-forgotten memories of empty shelves in shops but also the long lasting effects of totalitarian regime consisting in lack of dignity and hostility towards others. Arkuszevska is certain that many years or perhaps generations would have to pass until it changes. This trip and all the disappointments made her fully acknowledge the decision from many years before and answer the title question positively in spite of all the problems encountered in exile. In her case it is the past which triggered her decision to emigrate and "autobiographical memory allows [her] to imagine possible futures" (de Saint Laurent and Zittoun 215) and the presence only confirmed its validity.

Her autobiographical, adventurous and narrative written in the form of popular memoirs recurrently refers to how she managed to exchange the reality of Communist Poland for Canada that has given her endless opportunities to better the family's situation. The advantages of Canada, Peru, and other countries the Arkuszevskis have visited are continuously juxtaposed with the grim memories of and from Poland. *Was It Worth It?* originates from the conviction shared by Hall and Brah that it is the past regimes of power that determine people's perception of the world (Brah 182) and she remains faithful to this formative experience in her autobiographical text. As suggested by Shore and Kauko, "memory narratives are not mere descriptions of the past. They offer an evaluative and explanatory view to the past whose meaning is relative to the circumstances surrounding the act of narrating, as well as to the narrator him- or herself" (100).

Aga Maksimowska's *Giant*, Kasia Jaronczyk's *Lemons* and Liliana Arkuszevska's *Was It Worth It?* offer three different stories of migration from Poland to Canada. They are all linked by the time of migration, which happens in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the authors' and protagonists' peculiar experience of Communist Poland clashed with the free and democratic Canada, as well as similar dates of publication on the Canadian literary market. Despite various problems, expectations, and hopes, all three female characters stay in Canada, and, although they do not deny their Polish roots, Gosia, Basia and Liliana affirm their new diasporic selves and prove Brah's conviction that their "diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'" (182). According to Shore and Kauko, "family narratives are also anchored by landmark events" (99) and for the protagonists of the three analyzed texts,



it is Communism and its fall, personally experienced in the country informed by old-fashioned standards of gender roles, abuse, as well as migration to Canada, which all serve as such landmark events that uniquely shape their identities. The experience of Communism has definitely marked all of them forever in many different ways: Gosia decides she needs to forget her Polish language and traditions to merge with the Canadian society, Basia has to pay a high price for the abuse suffered from the closest relatives in Communist Poland, and Liliana, denouncing Polish deficits, successfully adapts to North American standards and at the end of her narrative announces the possibility of another move. All in all, these narratives in fictional and non-fictional stories “give [the migrants] a voice and visibility” (Brownlie 9) and present the ways Communist regime of power, family relation, memories, gender roles, and economic situation inform new diasporic selves in Canada and illustrate how the memory of political, familial and economic exploitation shapes the identity of contemporary migrants.

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## | Abstract

DAGMARA DREWNIAK

**From Poland to Canada: Memories of Communist Poland and Migration to Canada in Three Texts by Polish-Born Migrant Women Writers**

Canadian ethnic literature has been dominated by testimonies of migrant experience for a long time. Writers of Eastern European extraction, such as Janice Kulyk Keefer, Eva Hoffman, Eva Stachniak, Lisa Appignanesi or Elaine Kalman Naves to mention just a few, have contributed to the vast body of Canadian migrant literature, giving voice to the quandaries of white, invisible minority migration. As it turns out, the latest texts published by Polish-born Canadian women writers also address the issues of migration and the memory of Communist Poland, which the writers left in the 1980s and early 1990s. The aim of this paper is to look at three selected texts: *Giant* (2012) by Aga Maksimowska, *Lemons* (2017) by Kasia Jaronczyk and *Was It Worth It. Columbus in Jeans* (2019) by Liliana Arkuszewska, all of which are debut novels, and discuss their perception and rendition of Communist Poland, which the authors left behind physically and simultaneously struggled to free from mentally. The narratives chosen for this study, despite substantial differences, bear certain similarities in their treatment of Poland as well as become important commentaries on the status of migrant discourses in North America.

**Keywords:** memory, Communist Poland, Canada, migration, migrant literature, migrant novel

## | Abstrakt

DAGMARA DREWNIAK

**Z Polski do Kanady. Komunistyczna Polska i emigracja widziana oczami kanadyjskich pisarek urodzonych w Polsce**

W kanadyjskiej literaturze etnicznej od wielu lat pojawiają się świadectwa doświadczeń migrantów. Pisarki o pochodzeniu wschodnioeuropejskim, takie jak Janice Kulyk Keefer, Eva Hoffman, Eva Stachniak, Lisa Appignanesi czy Elaine Kalman Naves, by wymienić tylko kilka z nich, wniosły ogromny wkład do kanadyjskiej literatury migracyjnej, dając wyraz rozterkom migracji białych, niewidzialnych mniejszości. Jak się okazuje, najnowsze teksty opublikowane przez kanadyjskie pisarki urodzone w Polsce również poruszają kwestie migracji i pamięci o komunistycznej Polsce, którą opuścili w latach 80. i na początku lat 90. Celem niniejszego

artykułu jest przyjrzenie się trzem wybranym tekstom: *Giant* (2012) Agi Maksimowskiej, *Lemons* (2017) Kasi Jaronczyk oraz *Was It Worth It? Columbus in Jeans* (2019) Liliany Arkuszewskiej. Wszystkie te teksty to utwory debiutanckie, w których autorki przedstawiają sposób postrzegania komunistycznej Polski sprzed przełomu 1989 roku, którą ich bohaterki zostawiły za sobą fizycznie i jednocześnie, już w Kanadzie, walczyły o uwolnienie się od niej duchowo i mentalnie. Narracje wybrane do tego studium, pomimo istotnych różnic (także gatunkowych), wykazują pewne podobieństwa w traktowaniu dziedzictwa komunizmu i Polski, oraz zdają się być ważnymi komentarzami na temat statusu migrantów i dyskursów migracyjnych w Ameryce Północnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pamięć, komunizm, Polska, Kanada, literatura migracyjna, powieść migracyjna

## | Bio

Dagmara Drewniak, Ph.D., D. Litt., teaches American and Canadian literature at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Her research interests include: literature by immigrants from Poland and Eastern Europe, multiculturalism in English Canadian literature, images of Central and Eastern Europe in Canada and Canadian literature, life-writing, Jewish and Holocaust studies, migrant and postcolonial literature. She has recently published *Forgetful Recollections: Images of Central and Eastern Europe in Canadian Literature* (2014) and, with A. Rzepa and K. Macedulska, *The Self and the World: Aspects of the Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary North American Literary Memoir by Women* (2018), as well as a number of essays on Janice Kulyk Keefer, Eva Stachniak, Eva Hoffman, Michael Ondaatje, Lisa Appignanesi, Anne Michaels, Bernice Eisenstein and Norman Ravin. She has also published on Jewish motifs in Australian literature (Arnold Zable and Lily Brett). Her new book entitled *Figura domu. Szkice o najnowszej literaturze emigrantów z ziem polskich i ich potomków w Kanadzie* [*The Figure of Home. Essays on Anglophone Literature of Migrants from Polish Territories and their Descendants in Canada*] was published in 2022. From 2018 to 2022 she was director of a National Science Centre grant devoted to the writings of Polish diaspora in Canada. She is the President of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies.

E-mail: dagmarad@amu.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-0981-2331