

Writing the Polish American Woman
in Postwar Ethnic Fiction

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INTRODUCTION |||

Polish American Women

A Cultural and Literary Construct

The stories immigrants tell about themselves become a way of making sense of who one is, how one can be of many worlds at once, and most importantly, making sense of those experiences in light of both the homeland and the host culture.

—Archana A. Pathak¹

My mother ended each story the same way: “To be alive in this country is a miracle. You should thank God every day.”

But this was the only place we knew. How could someone else’s stories make us understand?

—Leslie Pietrzyk²

A woman . . . called to let me know she was hoping we would be playing authentic Polish music. . . . What did I know about what they listened to over there? I only knew that this was the music we played here, and it happened to be sung in Polish, and sometimes told of Polish things.

—Suzanne Strempek Shea³

I

For three-quarters of a century now, Polish American women writers have been reaching for the ancestral to write female Polishness into the narrative of America. Striving to eliminate or circumvent deeply embedded and institutionalized barriers, they find their strength and uniqueness in relational female networks that go back to the original homeland. They continuously construct and reconstruct gendered ethnicity amid tensions brought on by forces of social class, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation as well as by political and religious pressures. Their success in moving Polish American ethnic space from the nineteenth-century marginality of the “not quite white” immigrants to the normalized middle-class center of the twentieth century freed them to experiment with multiple ethno-racial constructs in the twenty-first century.

Harriet Zabrosky serves as an apt example of a Polish American woman of the new century. She is the twenty-something protagonist of Elizabeth Dembrowsky’s experimental novel, *My Monk* (2009), and her self-constructed identity testifies to the malleability of gendered white ethnicity in twenty-first-century America. Dembrowsky allows Harriet to challenge the invisibility of a white ethnic, situates her amid various identity options, and empowers her to make independent choices even if they appear whimsical or irrational. Harriet’s closest friends “get annoyed with her insistence on ‘being Polish.’ Harriet is a third generation American; in fact, she is a third-generation Massachusettsian, in fact, she is a third-generation Stoughtonian. However, Harriet likes being Polish as she thinks it gives her full permission to be stubborn and prideful.”⁴ Harriet freely selects and deliberately constructs a gendered ethnic self by identifying herself fully as Polish despite her multiethnic gene pool and her American birth. She consciously ignores her strong emotional attachment to America and her “partly olive”⁵ skin, a visible link to her Spanish and French great-grandmothers. This third-generation ethnic woman approaches ethnicity as a voluntary choice, as a matter of consent rather than descent,⁶ when she decides on Polishness as her space of identification. Harriet’s contemporary, Anya, the narrator cum protagonist of Karolina Waclawiak’s debut novel, *How to Get into the Twin Palms* (2012), deploys a similar ethnic matrix when she engages in ethnic cross-dressing. However, Waclawiak’s character distances herself from Polishness. Dissatisfied with her Polish roots, Anya, an immigrant

albeit a child immigrant, recognizes ethnicity as an artificial construct to be discarded or modified at will by employing a carefully selected set of ethnic markers⁷ that would allow her, she believes, to move seamlessly from the rejected Polish identity to the desired identification with Russian immigrants.

Both Elizabeth Dembrowsky and Karolina Waclawiak, who write the Polish American self, rework yet again the archetypal plot of American becoming, of leaving, arriving, and staying in-between, and of constructing self from the opposite pulls of disparate cultures. Taking advantage of the privilege of whiteness, they grant their characters freedom to blend with the dominant culture, to construct a Polish American ethnic self, or even to engage in an appropriation of markers belonging to the ethnic other. These new ethnic shape-shifters may slip in and out of different identities to satisfy an immediate need or to gain a social advantage.

Such liberty to self-create was not always an option available to Polish immigrants and ethnics. Their struggle has been both chronicled and championed by several generations of Polish American writers, especially women writers, who believed that their stories deserved to be heard and whose fiction reflected as well as shaped ethnic ideas of gendered identity. Taken together, their narratives trace the developmental trajectory of ethnic views of self, shaped internally by the Polish American communities and externally by the mainstream culture. They also offer a complex portrait of Polish immigration with its covert class system, pervasive presence of the Roman Catholic Church and patriarchy, as well as uneasy attitudes toward both the homeland and the receiving country.

Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction opens a long-neglected conversation on the construction of the gendered white ethnic self in Polish American post-World War II literature principally by women writers raised in the Roman Catholic tradition. My focus on self-construction limits my choice of texts to ones written predominantly by Polish ethnic and (im)migrant women. For some of the (im)migrant women, their immigration status might remain fluid throughout their lives when they repeatedly change homelands. Many never decide on a permanent homeland but stay within a pattern of repeated migrations between Poland and the United States. An inclusion of a small number of texts by Polish Canadian women, male authors, and non-Poles enriches this study by allowing a comparative analysis of ethnic self-construction and the

construction and representation of gendered identity. This juxtaposition delineates the internal (i.e., Polish American) and external (i.e., mainstream) cultural contexts of self-construction in addition to shedding light on barriers between women and self-actualization. It illustrates, as in Joseph S. Wnukowski's⁸ short story, some of the struggles faced by Polish American women. Moreover, the selection of texts reflects the settlement patterns of Polish immigrants as strongly circumscribed by their religious identity. As Timothy L. Smith finds, common religious affiliation was a crucial reason for groups of immigrants to settle together. Smith believes that it was even stronger than a common language, common history, and common descent. He suggests that "the customs and beliefs of particular varieties of faith and the traditions of loyalty to them seem, then, to have been the decisive determinants of ethnic affiliation in America."⁹ Though there is, undoubtedly, a need for more research about fiction produced by Polish writers hailing from a range of religious traditions, such work exceeds the scope of the present study, which focuses for the most part on a fairly unified group of writers hailing from Polish American Catholic communities.

The principal purpose of this volume is to offer considered readings of a number of novels and short stories that narrate the first-, second-, and third-generation American experience of white ethnic women, present a detailed and sociologically realistic image of the Polish diaspora, and testify to the Polish American awareness of ethnic uniqueness. Moreover, *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction* aims at adding a literary voice that so far has not had a strong presence in the academy among numerous studies of other ethnic literatures as well as historical and sociological studies of Polish immigration to the United States. As sociologist Mary Patrice Erdmans suggests, "We know a lot about why people migrate, but less about how people make sense of migration. . . . One way we can understand how people make sense of their worlds is to listen to their stories."¹⁰ Erdmans clearly points to narratives as agents of identity construction and to literature as an important forum for groups marginalized due to their ethnicity, gender, social class, or race. In addition, the present study shifts the current discussion of diasporic literature in a new direction away from research conducted by scholars of Polish literature and centered on the literary output of World War II émigrés. Its historical and artistic values notwithstanding, émigré writing, published almost exclusively in Polish, has had little impact on the American reading public. The popular ethnic

literature at the center of this study allows readers to witness the construction process of gendered ethnicity within an easily assimilable and largely invisible white ethnic group over the last three-quarters of a century.

The chronological as well as thematic organization of this study traces evolutionary changes in identity construction of ethnic women. The narrative trajectory presented here begins with the short stories of Monica Krawczyk, whose immigrant women are firmly rooted in the homogeneous working-class ethnic communities of the 1930s and 1940s. It follows with the narratives developed by her disciples in the 1950s and early 1960s, where female protagonists move away from the ethnic neighborhoods to the fast-growing white American suburbs as they gain middle-class status. Yet, their literary daughters choose to return to the Polish American centers in fiction by the next generation of women. Writers such as Suzanne Strempek Shea and Leslie Pietrzyk return to strong working-class ethnic roots in their stories set in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, the turn-of-the-century texts, and especially narratives from the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, propose a new “on demand” model of ethnicity for young well-educated women who are perfectly assimilated into American society. Such characters populate novels by Elizabeth Dembrowsky, Dagmara Dominczyk, and Karolina Waclawiak. Benefiting from their white invisibility, they can blend in with the mainstream, they can identify themselves as Polish American if they so choose, or they can engage in ethno-racial cross-dressing.

The organization of *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction* underscores one of this book’s assertions about the direction of assimilatory moves. As evidenced by Krawczyk’s short fiction, being consigned to the position of a racial subaltern by the mainstream motivates immigrants to engage in a series of assimilatory actions to prove Americanness. However, once they claimed Americanness, left the position of the foreign other, and obtained an undisputed place within the “white” mainstream, Polish characters felt liberated from all ethno-racial considerations. Secure in their whiteness, they allow experimentation within their ethnic spaces while they construct and reconstruct Polishness to claim ancestral heritage and retain unique cultural identity.

Just as race is consigned to silences in Polish American literature of the last decades, so, too, for the most part, is the memory of the original homeland and its victimization: during the partitions when Poland ceased to exist

as an independent country (1795–1918), during World War II, and during the years of the communist regime. With the original homeland growing increasingly distant, many second- and third-generation writers of the second half of the twentieth century anchor ethnic identity in largely homogeneous neighborhoods built by immigrant ancestors. Yet, they all acknowledge that the hold on Polish communal ethnicity has grown more tenuous as white ethnic urban communities gradually disappear. Interestingly, the demise of ethnic neighborhoods combined with the disintegration of the communist system in Europe reestablishes connections in Poland. Young, well-educated, and prosperous Polish American characters turn their gaze back on the ancestral homeland as they reconstruct gendered ethnicity in the twenty-first century. The evolution of identity constructs in Polish American fiction since World War II illustrates significant changes in ethnic patterns among Polish Americans: a gradual movement away from strong homogeneous ethnic communities toward individualistic neighborhoods of one. It also follows the parallel trend in contemporary literature with its continuing change of focus from large historical processes and events to a total concentration on the fate of an individual.¹¹

In *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction*, I argue that over the last three-quarters of a century, Polish American popular literature by women writers challenges the Polish American woman's invisibility by offering a consistent image of her. My readings show that she is a woman well aware of being positioned at an intersection of several often-hostile forces where gendered ethnicity is inextricable from classed ethnicity. She contends with social-class restrictions and damaging expectations that often go back to the distant Polish past. She may have to cope with nationalistically inflected expectations of the intelligentsia class or struggle with the working-class patriarchal oppression supported by the Catholic Church under the guise of elevating her status in the image of the Virgin Mary. Her awareness of these restrictions, her refusal to internalize them, and her rejection of victimhood become acts of rebellion as she resists the need to please and constructs a gendered ethnic identity in pursuit of self-fulfillment. Ethnic, immigrant, and also in some cases migrant fiction¹² becomes liberatory as it advocates empowerment against oppression and charts the deployment of female-centric patterns of resistance while showing how Polish American women successfully perform gendered, ethnicized, and classed Americanness.

Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction considers the ways women negotiate discourses of belonging as well as posits that it is women who, by writing their gendered ethnic identity, tell the story of Polish Americans and join other ethnic women in telling the story of America. In their narratives, Polish American homes become the sites where, through the efforts of women, ethnic consciousness has been forged and transmitted from generation to generation within female clans. Women have always been the force behind constructing Polish American identity, not only in the home but also in neighborhoods, where their tireless work in Polish American parishes and secular organizations sustained the larger ethnic community. Capturing their vision of themselves, Polish American women authors over the past seven or eight decades created an entry point into the ethnic story of Poles in America.

II

The period immediately following World War II marked the particularly vigorous growth of ethnic fiction, since it was the time when Americans were taking a fresh look at ethnicity and race and were beginning a discussion of their place in American culture. Tracy Floreani argues convincingly that all ethnic narratives deepen our understanding of American culture.¹³ Polish American texts by women authors make an important contribution to the field of writing by ethnic women in the United States as they join in creating a space of self-expression for those who were often silenced and as they document women's attempts to reclaim power and visibility. Even a brief comparison of Polish American texts with narratives by women from other immigrant groups uncovers interethnic commonalities in treatment of gendered, classed, and often raced ethnicity. Within such an environment, Polish American women writers take on an active role in contributing to the American multiethnic social environment through their focus on ethnic performance, advocacy of women's empowerment, and development of gender-aware themes.

Many critical studies that focus on literary output of women from a wide range of ethnic groups such as Chinese American, South Asian American, Irish American, Italian American, Hispanic/Latina/Chicana American, etc., draw attention to the value of ethnic literature by women in ushering

doubly marginalized groups, both ethnic and female, into the mainstream. Lucia Guerra-Cunningham, writing about Latina American women, sees their stories as a way to freedom from “the oppressive dungeon of silence.” She credits narratives with identifying the processes that led to relegating women to the position of the silent Other.¹⁴ Likewise, Karen M. Cardozo in her analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s South Asian American fiction praises Lahiri as well as Chinese American Maxine Hong Kingston for introducing two formerly ostracized ethnic groups into the cultural mainstream.¹⁵ The crucial role of fiction in bringing attention to ethnic women and in recognizing the value of their stories has also been presented by Sally Barr Ebest in her book, *The Banshees: A Literary History of Irish American Women Writers*, and by Mary Jo Bona in *Women Writing Cloth: Migratory Fictions in the American Imaginary*, in *By the Breath of Their Mouths: Narratives of Resistance in Italian America*, and in *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers*. Bona draws connections between writing and needlework as two activities that allowed Italian American women a measure of upward social mobility. She points to the power of storytelling, with its “linguistic codes that reveal their resistance toward a dominant culture that would keep them quiet,”¹⁶ and commends women writers for finding the middle ground between full assimilation into the American mainstream and the perpetuation of traditional Italian familial restrictions.¹⁷ Likewise, Sally Barr Ebest draws attention to the barriers erected by both the mainstream and the Irish American community that women writers had to struggle with. Barr Ebest asserts that some of the obstacles came from the rooted-in-Catholicism expectations of modesty and self-effacement¹⁸ that Irish American women must confront, and from the strong resentment that their gendered storytelling did not employ traditional Irish American themes of “camaraderie, drink, violence, and pub life, but also because they refuse to reify saintly mothers and spend much time on priests.”¹⁹

Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction supports the existence of this trend also in Polish American women’s literature, as ethnic and immigrant women gain their voice and a secure narrative space after years of suppression from without through negative gender and ethnic stereotypes²⁰ and from within the community that denied them the right to be heard. Much of Polish American fiction, as is true of other ethnic American texts, explores domestic topographies as settings for character construction. Such settings, while suggesting important themes of home and family,

are heavily gendered, and are at times dismissed as of lesser value in the construction of national or ethnic identity. Suzanne Strempek Shea, a successful Polish American novelist whose work fits comfortably within the category of domestic fiction, revealed in an interview that she was urged by sincere Polish Americans to write “about more ‘serious’ things—Polish historical topics, events, people—non-fiction.”²¹ *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction*, which focuses on the ability of gendered ethnic literature to disturb male-centric cultural patterns, challenges attempts to undermine the value of ethnic fiction as another attempt at silencing women’s voices and at forcing them to speak in a male language of long-established literary forms.

Shared religious traditions of Roman Catholicism underlie many common concerns expressed by Polish American women writers as well as authors representing other ethnic groups. Themes of gender oppression prominent in Polish American narratives also have a strong presence in post-World War II writing by Irish American women. Sally Barr Ebest identifies Irish American women’s fiction as a double battleground against patriarchy where women struggle both with patriarchal restrictions imposed by society and with “the Catholic Church, which created and reinforced them.”²² For Barr Ebest, the value of ethnic literature by women resides in its ability to foreground women’s issues that rarely fit within the long-established image of a particular ethnic/national character.²³ According to Mary Jo Bona, Italian American women writers also fault the Catholic Church for placing women in a subordinate and inferior position.²⁴ Similarly, Jennifer Bess in her analysis of Julia Alvarez’s novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, lists instances of Church-condoned patriarchal oppression and suggests that Yolanda, Alvarez’s alter ego, uses “silence as a means of revolution,”²⁵ a way to rebel against the oppressive status quo within the Caribbean American community. Polish American fiction, likewise, engages in devising and offering strategies—intentional rebellious silence, transgressive behavior, surreptitious undermining of the power structure—to overcome powerlessness and marginalization.

Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction posits that Polish American literature offers nonethnic readers an easy point of entry into Polishness, just as other ethnic texts might invite the reader into Mexicanness, Indianness or Irishness, and serves as a site for construction of gendered and classed identity. Most ethnic writers—including Polish

Americans like Suzanne Strempek Shea, Leslie Pietrzyk, and Dagmara Dominczyk, just to mention a few, as well as Mexican American Sandra Cisneros, South Asian American Bharati Mukherjee, Chinese American Amy Tan, and Korean Americans Catherine Chung and Patricia Park—rework many autobiographical elements in their fiction to normalize the ethnic milieu within the American mainstream. As Tace Hedrick suggests in her analysis of Chica Lit, they become “ethnic producers . . . exotic yet homegrown”²⁶ because Chicana fiction selects and employs easily readable ethnic markers in constructing ethnic identity and teaches its female readers, both ethnic and nonethnic, how middle-class ethnicity can be performed successfully. The constant tension between the exoticism of ethnicity and integration into the mainstream becomes an important topic in Ellen McCracken’s discussion of texts by Ana Castillo, Cristina García, and Denise Chavez. McCracken contends that Latina writers include “ethnographic passages” in their work as evidence of insider status and a way to attract audiences to their work, since, as she writes, “sameness is not as marketable in current conditions as is difference.”²⁷ Interestingly, some Polish American authors, such as Brigid Pasulka, Karolina Waclawiak, and Leslie Pietrzyk, move on to nonethnic fiction after their initial success with Polish or Polish American novels.

Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction argues that, contrary to many other ethnic literatures that write poverty, abuse, violence, and racism into their narratives, Polish American fiction rarely deploys these themes. Post–World War II novels and short stories invite readers into the stable middle-class milieu, testifying to the success the Polish ethnic group achieved fairly quickly after their arrival (i.e., within one or two generations). Yet, at the same time, Polish American fiction by women engages with common ethnic themes of identity, belonging, loss, guilt, powerlessness, patriarchal oppression, and objectification that are of importance for most of the ethnic women existing in a liminal space between different cultural constructs.

III

Since *Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction* draws its evidence from ethnic and immigrant fiction and some autobiographical

immigrant writing, it enters a readily recognizable multidisciplinary field of inquiry where not only literary scholars but also historians, anthropologists, and sociologists interested in migration and ethnicity turned their critical gaze upon literary sources both fictional and autobiographical as a rich mine of information. Karen Majewski's pioneering study, *Traitors and True Poles: Narrating a Polish-American Identity, 1880–1939*, brings to light nearly forgotten voices of immigrant writers who wrote in their native language for the audience of their compatriots. In her book, Majewski considers the writing of Polish American identity in family-focused narratives told by the representatives of *stara emigracja* (the old emigration). An anthology, *Something of My Very Own to Say: American Women Writers of Polish Descent*, edited by Thomas S. Gladsky and Rita Holmes Gladsky, presents introductory essays and excerpts of poetry, fiction, and autobiographical writing by a heterogeneous group of women writers of Polish descent from disparate time periods and immigrant cohorts. In his introduction to the volume, Thomas S. Gladsky problematizes the contradictions within the Polish American gender discourse and identifies “women in revolt”²⁸ rising against the immigrant conditions and ethnic prejudice they encountered in the United States. Building upon Majewski's and Gladsky's research, this study, for the most part, selects literary texts published during the second half of the twentieth century and the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century. Although the majority of this volume discusses narratives written in English and published in the United States, it has been enriched by the inclusion of several immigrant texts written originally in Polish, since they often give voice to new arrivals that otherwise would be rendered voiceless. Polish-language immigrant fiction, as argued by Majewski, rightly belongs to a subcategory of American literature that includes works produced in a variety of languages, a practice she traces back to the early 1920s.²⁹ Likewise, Werner Sollors classifies “literature in languages apart from English”³⁰ within the canon of American ethnic literature, which corresponds with the recent trend in the study of ethnic archives that must contain texts in the initial languages, without which ethnic literatures would be rendered “illiterate and unreadable.”³¹

The “ethnic authenticity” of the selected texts has also been tested against the definition of American ethnic fiction provided by Sollors in his seminal study, *Ethnic Modernism*, where he asserts that “works of American ‘ethnic’ prose literature [are] written by, about, or for persons who

perceived themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups.”³² A strong presence of female characters and clear concepts of gendered and classed ethnicity within Polish American Roman Catholic communities constitute the key criteria for the selection of literary texts.

The texts chosen for this study have been drawn from several categories of literary texts. First, a substantial number of them represent work of Polish American women writers who are themselves descendants of Polish immigrants, often representing the third generation. Many of these ethnic³³ authors take up themes from the past, mainly their own past of growing up in the quickly disappearing ethnic enclaves of the Northeast and Midwest,³⁴ and consider what it means to be an ethnic woman in a multicultural society forced to negotiate among multiple gender constructs. The second category of texts includes English-language writing by Polish immigrant authors.³⁵ In their largely autobiographical fiction, they set out to explore the common immigrant themes of nostalgia, guilt, anger, and alienation as they struggle to construct a new gender identity that draws from their Polish experiences but also allows them to function within their new American reality. The third and final group represents work produced by Polish immigrants, temporary migrants, émigrés, and exiles, many of whom wrote and continue to write in Polish.³⁶ A few of them experienced the trauma of immigration and sometimes forced exile as adults and recreated it in Polish specifically for audiences of their compatriots proficient in the language. Both Polish literary studies³⁷ and American literary studies focused on texts written in languages other than English³⁸ acknowledge their substantial literary output.

IV

Polish immigrant women and their Polish American daughters and granddaughters represent a heterogeneous group stratified by social class, economic circumstances, level of education, and ethnic/national consciousness. Many Polish American characters in fiction trace their roots to the *stara emigracja*, often also referred to as the *za chlebem* (“for bread”) immigration, when both rural and urban poverty forced thousands of Poles to seek economic relief elsewhere in Europe as well as in North and South America.³⁹ The most significant numbers of Poles from this immigrant cohort

began arriving in the United States in the 1870s. James Pula finds that between 1875 and the outbreak of World War I, which put a stop to this mass migration, “some 9 million Poles”⁴⁰ sailed across the Atlantic. A desire to escape grinding poverty motivated them but many viewed themselves as temporary migrants who fully intended to return to the Polish countryside after amassing substantial savings. They were mainly peasants who left behind a country that had no political identity between 1795, when in the Third Partition the Kingdom of Poland was dissolved and its lands and people put in control of the three neighboring powers of Russia, Prussia, and Austria—each part thereafter enduring varying degrees of economic and political hardship and anti-Polish policies—and 1918, when modern Poland began to form. For the most part, these emigrants were escaping poverty, religious and national persecution, and, in case of men, conscription into a foreign army. The majority grounded their identity in Roman Catholic faith as well as in their *okolica* (the village or region of their origin), and, as Michael Novak suggests about immigrants from Italy, “often it was America that taught them they were ethnic.”⁴¹

Women arriving with these first immigrant cohorts were at an additional disadvantage, since, in large numbers, they were illiterate in their own language. In Poland, as late as 1931, “almost every other woman in the age group between 25 and 49 years (41.3 per cent of the total number of women in that age group) . . . could not read and write.”⁴² This was especially true, as Krystyna Wrochno suggests, among the rural women whose families were the most traditional:

in which all decisions were made by the father, the interest of the farm being the primary consideration. . . . It was the father who made the decision on the son’s education and he did so from the point of view of its costs and usefulness for the farm . . . disregarding the child’s abilities and interests. Girls were, as a rule, not being educated because, apart from the lack of financial means for such education—there prevailed the belief that women were in no need of knowledge.⁴³

Even if elementary education was made compulsory, as was the case in Galicia under the Austrian occupation, the insufficient number of village schools prevented children from obtaining even basic literacy skills. In Russian Poland, many parents refused to send their children, especially girls, to school:

They were motivated not only by a resolve to defend their children (at least girls) from Russification, but also by traditional ways of thinking. They assumed that contact with the authorities, with institutions of public life—in which a Russian schooling might have been of use—were reserved for men; hence girls did not need the same education as boys. Thus, women in Polish lands did not have equal access to general education, and in the Polish kingdom and Galicia even to elementary schools.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the meager educational opportunities for the daughters and granddaughters of the *stara emigracja* persisted in the United States. Helena Znaniecka Lopata reports that even as late as the 1980s “women still received less education than did the men” and that, out of all European immigrant groups, “the gap between men and women was highest for the Poles and the Russians.”⁴⁵ Thus, patterns of gender-based oppression established in Poland—and clearly linked to a specific socioeconomic class—seem to persist in the new world several generations later.

A cursory overview of historical and sociological research of the latter part of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century focusing on the *za chlebem* immigrant women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their immediate descendants, reveals that most scholars situate these women firmly in the familial private sphere. Thaddeus C. Radzilowski, a historian, drawing from the work completed by both Helen Stankiewicz Zand and Donna Gabaccia, posits that “despite the family’s patriarchal forms, sometimes recast and actually strengthened by the immigration experience, and despite a division of labor, resources, and support that was often unequal and disadvantageous, most Polish immigrant women . . . probably found their identities and most of life’s satisfactions in their families.”⁴⁶ This assertion notwithstanding, Radzilowski provides a wealth of examples of immigrant women who managed to break the stereotype of a marginalized yet happy and fulfilled wife and mother, including women who sought a life of professional work and power through entering religious orders; women who ran their own boardinghouse businesses; women like my own mother-in-law, who continued working in the New England textile industry even after she was married and had children; women who led strikes in these textile mills or used clubs and rolling pins to fight against the strikebreakers threatening the jobs of their husbands; women who in 1898 created their own national insurance fund, *Zwiazek Polek w Ameryce*, when the two Polish fraternal organizations refused to

admit them as full members;⁴⁷ and women who believed “that the emancipation, education, and protection of women would strengthen the nation and preserve Polishness.”⁴⁸

John J. Bukowczyk cautions against ascribing such revolutionary activities of Polish American women to the feminist or even proto-feminist movement without a clear understanding that they have always been firmly rooted in the milieu of “male-dominated families, churches, organizations, and ethnic communities.”⁴⁹ For Bukowczyk, these male-dominated social structures, be they present in mainstream American culture or Polish American Catholic culture, engaged equally in the “othering” of Polish immigrant and Polish American ethnic women of a specific socioeconomic class, that is, the rural and urban working class. They strengthened the contradictory stereotypes always aimed at controlling women through assaults on their self-esteem or through limiting their opportunities. The message directed at the immigrant women was clear: all their achievements outside the home notwithstanding, their work as “wives, mothers and kinswomen”⁵⁰ was the only thing that mattered. It is hardly surprising, then, that the only recent book-length monograph devoted in its entirety to a study of Polish American women, *The Grasiński Girls* by sociologist Mary Patrice Erdmans, situates its subjects, five working-class women born during the 1920s and 1930s, in the domestic sphere. Even though these women “constructed their identity mostly in the domestic sphere,” Erdmans concludes that a significant element of their identity is resistance to the limiting forces of patriarchy. As the “sites of resistance,” they chose what they could control: their own families and their minds. They also sought support from other women, since “being around women, they could more easily dismiss a male-centric set of values that devalued them.”⁵¹ Their personal resistance did not blind them to the waste of unfulfilled potential, but it did not turn them bitter.

The other distinct waves of Polish immigrants began arriving in the United States as a result of World War II. Znaniecka Lopata separates them into two discrete cohorts: the displaced persons directly affected by the war, who saw themselves as political exiles, and the group of political asylees, separated family members, and temporary economic migrants that arrived after 1965.⁵² Mary Patrice Erdmans isolates the most recent period of vigorous immigration, the 1980s, when “the Solidarity union and democratic opposition in Poland emerged and the political and economic communist

system began to crumble.”⁵³ The newest immigrants included a mixture of political exiles, expelled from Poland for their anti-communist activities, along with a substantial number of people exhausted by the everyday hardships of the failing economy who dreamt of a safe and prosperous life.

The level of education for immigrant women improved dramatically with the arrival in the United States of the émigrés, exiles, and displaced persons who were forced out of Poland because of World War II or the political and economic pressures of the postwar communist system. In general terms, Polish women and girls reaching the United States after World War II had an advantage over the earlier arrivals. Many of them belonged to the Polish intelligentsia, a high socioeconomic class, and were educated in Polish schools during the interwar period. Some young women were university graduates or students before the war, since, as Anna Żarnowska suggests, “Educational aspirations stemming from the needs of everyday life were characteristic of the whole of the intelligentsia, males as well as females.”⁵⁴ They were, of course, also considered the elite group charged with spreading education to the lower classes,⁵⁵ and thus they exhibited a strong sense of mission. Even so, they were not free from “a rather strict division of social roles . . . deeply rooted as a principle in Polish consciousness, as a tradition-sanctified model to which all should aspire.”⁵⁶ More often than not, women were isolated in the private, domestic sphere while men were expected to perform in the public sphere.⁵⁷ The school curriculum, different for boys and girls, supported such separation.

Women from the next generation of immigrants, the ones brought up and educated in communist Poland, were able to take advantage of equal educational experiences, and even preferential treatment in college admission if they came from the working class, whether rural or urban. The low standard of living in communist Poland, the constant consumer shortages, and the skewed currency exchange rate led, then, to paradoxical situations in which Polish professional women chose to migrate temporarily to the United States to work as domestics in order to purchase middle-class comforts for their families in Poland. On the other hand, the high educational achievement of many Polish women allowed some of them to enter professions upon their immigration and within one generation move into the American middle or upper-middle class. Yet, their high educational and professional achievement notwithstanding, they were not free of the constraints of the patriarchal family model. Krystyna Wrochno writes that as

late as 1969, already a quarter of a century into Poland's communist system, "the public opinion persists that family responsibilities are women's main and basic responsibilities. The fact that a mother works, does not relieve her of her family duties. What is more, her occupational activity should not adversely affect the performance of her family functions."⁵⁸ The confinement of a woman's role primarily to her reproductive function and the framing of her preeminent "mission" as that of a mother have been strongly supported by the communist government and also by the opposition represented by the Catholic Church.

Polish American literature by women writers published during the last seven or eight decades reflects this complex nature of Polish immigration to the United States as it constructs white gendered ethnic identity at the intersection of social class and educational level, political situation in Poland at the time of emigration, economically or politically motivated reason for leaving, as well as secular and Church-supported patriarchy.

V

My discussion of the discursive spaces of gendered and classed ethnicity has been informed by the postmodern attention to context and concepts of invention, constructionism and, in Gill Jagger's formulation, "subjectivity, rooted in the work of Michel Foucault and, to some extent, Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Lacan,"⁵⁹ which has been embraced in the past thirty years by scores of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm writes about the invention of a variety of traditions in late-nineteenth-century Europe that were "to ensure or express social cohesion and identity,"⁶⁰ while Hugh Trevor-Roper dissects the creation of Scottish highland traditions.⁶¹ In "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," the anthropologist Michael Fischer advocates incorporating autobiographical ethnic fiction "within the traditional sociological literature on ethnicity."⁶² His investigation of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat* (1975), and Marita Golden's *Migrations of the Heart* (1983) leads him to conclude that ethnic identity is "reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual. . . . Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught

and learned.”⁶³ Furthermore, he sees this invention of ethnicity as a process which offers a unique link between the past and future, since it is rooted in the past while it gestures to the future.⁶⁴ Writing in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, both Kathleen Neils Conzen and Werner Sollors dispute the traditional approach often seen in “historical interpretation”⁶⁵ of perceiving ethnic groups “as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units,”⁶⁶ while Matthew Frye Jacobson separates ethnicity from genetic and cultural inheritance and focuses on its flexibility in allowing self-construction.⁶⁷ Conzen, Sollors, and Jacobson see very little that is eternal and stable about ethnicity as well as about many other categories previously viewed as natural and immutable. Sollors employs the concept of invention as the key to a new understanding of not only ethnicity but such categories as gender, childhood, biography, and region, among others.⁶⁸ For Sollors, the proof of his theories lies in literature, which he continues to discuss in *Ethnic Modernism* (2002). Mary C. Waters reached similar conclusions, but, instead of fiction, Waters studied US census information and conducted interviews with ethnic Irish, Polish, and Italian Catholics. She found that each of her informants, mostly unconsciously, invented his or her own ethnic self by using a variety of sources of information, such as family stories passed on through generations, family documents, and family traditions and possessions, but also by absorbing the attitudes toward their ethnicity exhibited by the dominant culture and especially the media. Waters writes that one’s ethnicity is constructed from elements one selects not quite consciously from a personal—ethnic insider’s—repository of knowledge confronted with the outsider’s ethnic stereotypes, from what she calls “a cultural grab bag of Irish, Polish, or Italian stereotypical traits.”⁶⁹ This process of choosing and discarding can be especially complicated for ethnics of mixed ethnic background, who may choose to identify with only one or with multiple ethnicities and races represented in their ancestry.⁷⁰

The poststructuralist focus on connecting texts to their linguistic and social origins and on subjectivity, so evident in the understanding of ethnicity which favors constructionism over essentialism, is paralleled by feminist theories of gender. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler draws inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” and suggests “that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end.”⁷¹ For Butler, this construction of gender identity

intersects with race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and even regionalism,⁷² and becomes an ongoing performative process of constant repetition happening not in a vacuum, but “within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions.”⁷³ Gender is historically, culturally and politically inflected. Likewise, Elleke Boehmer, approaching gender discourse from the post-colonial perspective, compares concepts of gender to that of a nation and perceives them both not as natural but rather as “fabricated” entities where gender “is discursively organised, relationally derived, and culturally variable.”⁷⁴

In his discussion of cultural constructions of Polish and Polish American women, John J. Bukowczyk asserts that race and socioeconomic class are fundamental to understanding derogatory stereotypes often attached to Polish American women.⁷⁵ Bukowczyk gestures toward the intersectional theory Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw developed to account for the varying degrees and modes of oppression that women are exposed to and experience. Crenshaw’s feminist analysis of various forms of sexual assault against women of color allows her to argue that their heightened vulnerability to assault results from their positioning at the intersection of multiple prejudicial factors such as gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and sometimes also age. She believes that their situation is inherently different than that of other marginalized groups since they are placed at an intersection of both sexism and racism. Since Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality explains exclusion and sets identity within social and historical contexts, it offers a useful approach to the analysis of identity construction and gender performance of other ethnic women for whom “systems of race, gender, and class domination converge”⁷⁶ to create patterns of subordination and disempowerment.⁷⁷ This is also true of Polish immigrant and Polish American ethnic women, whose marginalization may be traced to the intersection of gender, social class, patriarchy, and even race.⁷⁸ While class identification may be changed through immigration, gender and race can never be separated.⁷⁹

My analysis of gendered, classed, and raced ethnicity in Polish American literature has also benefited from the research into white ethnicities conducted by Mary C. Waters, who asserts that for European Americans ethnicity becomes a matter of choice;⁸⁰ by David R. Roediger, who traces the process by which some southern and eastern European immigrants

moved from a racially suspect position to a privileged one when their whiteness was fully accepted;⁸¹ as well as by Ruth Frankenberg, who works with the concepts of transparency or invisibility of whiteness and highlights privileges associated with the normativity of whiteness.⁸²

VI

Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction both builds upon the work of my predecessors in various fields, and at the same time moves away from a broad discussion of immigrant writing in Polish or English and turns toward teasing out the specific: the construction of gendered ethnicity within the processes of assimilation and acculturation, combined with the tension between the dominant culture and the ethnic subaltern. While relying on evidence from several related disciplines, I concentrate on the analysis of female characters in Polish immigrant and Polish American ethnic fiction, written mostly by women, to trace the construction and evolution of gendered ethnicity roughly over the last seventy to eighty years. I posit that authors, while well aware of the benefits of white invisibility, are clearly conscious of the decades-long marginalization of ethnic women both by the mainstream and by Polish patriarchy, as well as by politically inflected models of gender performance. This study argues that in Polish immigrant and Polish American ethnic fiction, female characters fully cognizant of the agents of their victimization engage in a steady pushback against restrictions by deploying transgressive behaviors, passive resistance, ethnic cross-dressing, race switching, and performance of masculinity. The intersection of socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity/race, national and Roman Catholic ideologies, and even politics becomes the place of struggle where, amid the constant tension, women from each generation write their identity. They continuously (re)construct ethnic identities and, over time, migrate from communal to personal ethnicity—from ethnic communities to the community of one—and, as John J. Bukowczyk asserts, their Americanness is inextricably connected to their ethnic identity.⁸³

Polish American women writers featured in this study normalize an ethnic group that has been historically burdened with strongly negative stereotypes and give voice to ethnic women who have been rendered silent by both the mainstream and the Polish American patriarchy. By taking

possession of the Polish American ethnic space, women writers transform it from a space of working-class marginality to that of middle-class success where women, through their close links to female ancestors, write Polishness into Americanness.

The first chapter of this chronologically as well as thematically organized study enters the discussion of gendered ethnicity with an analysis of Monica Krawczyk's literary output. Krawczyk, the matriarch of Polish American short fiction, normalized the Polish immigrant "other" in a series of short stories published in mainstream American periodicals from 1931 to the early 1950s. Even though her women seem firmly embedded in the traditionally female domestic sphere within its working-class, heteronormative, and racially uniform world, she grants them a voice and removes them from the realm of invisibility. She makes them fully cognizant of the restrictions embedded in two oppressive cultures—Polish and American—which conspire to limit their self-expression. Krawczyk's characters work ingeniously and incessantly to liberate themselves both as new American women, empowered to bring education and innovation into their large families, and as ethnic women who keep the memory of their original Polish homeland alive.

The second chapter recovers forgotten texts by amateur ethnic writers submitting to literary contests from the late 1950s and early 1960s and seeks to demonstrate the influence of a deep-seated class division within the Polish American community on the construction of gendered ethnicity. While, at midcentury, middle-class, thoroughly acculturated or even assimilated ethnic women face a highly restrictive secular ideal of American domesticity, the strongly ethnic, mostly working-class women depicted in these texts are similarly oppressed by the Polish Marianism promoted by the Catholic Church. In a desperate search for sources of female empowerment, several authors turn to the still-fresh memories of World War II to illuminate the full range of women's accomplishments and potential on the home front and on European battlefields, sadly unrecognized and unrealized during peacetime.

Each of the next four chapters focuses on the work of a particular writer or on a theme as it analyzes narratives which for the most part recreate Polish American communities and trace their evolution during a three-decade-long period. The third chapter explores Suzanne Strempek Shea's construction of gendered ethnicity in Polish American, mostly working-class

communities in New England. Strempek Shea's thirty-something protagonists exist between two normative systems: the Polish American highly restricted, patriarchal, Roman Catholic, and working-class model of femininity and the growing American movement toward sexual freedom and gender equality espoused by the younger, college-educated representatives of the middle class. Strempek Shea's characters forcefully reject masculinist restrictions imposed on them by Polish American secular and religious ideologies, yet they continue to identify themselves as ethnic women by using nonrestrictive ethnic markers. Suzanne Strempek Shea's ethnic women characters, supported by extensive networks of female relations, friends, and ancestors, take firm control over constructing their gendered ethnicity.

In Polish American immigrant and ethnic fiction, the relationship between mothers and daughters, the trope of an absent mother, as well as class-inflected enactments of motherhood garner much more attention than sexuality as active elements in constructing women's identity. Chapter 4 centers on the working-class models of motherhood present in Leslie Pietrzyk's and Ellen Slezak's narratives, which explore the absence and the silence of mothers—the old-world mothers left behind when their daughters emigrated, or the new-world mothers missing from their daughters' lives. This chapter argues that ethnic daughters overcome maternal absence by using memories, stories, and cherished mementos to invent new mother figures capable of helping them tame the foreignness around them. In a subtle way, this process frees ethnic women from some patriarchal controls internalized by their Polish peasant mothers.

Chapter 5 continues to investigate Polish immigrant motherhood in Danuta Mostwin's novella, "Jocasta." Mostwin, a World War II émigré writer, explores the destructive quality of the Polish upper-middle-class model of patriotic motherhood embedded in the Matka-Polka (Mother-Pole) ideal. This chapter suggests that Mostwin's character, incapable of discarding and freeing herself from class-inflected restrictions, becomes a tragic anachronism who destroys both herself and her beloved son.

Chapter 6 isolates instances of rebellious and/or transgressive behavior that either openly or surreptitiously break constraints placed on ethnic women's expressions of sexuality. This discussion draws evidence from several texts, especially from novels by Elizabeth Kern and Melissa Kwasny, and asserts that Polish American women's sexual freedom may be curbed by several factors. In Polish American working-class heteronormative

communities, women's sexuality is circumscribed by patriarchal prohibitions supported by the Catholic Church's teaching linking sexuality to sin and promoting an ideal of womanhood contained in the concept of the Virgin-Mother. This chapter posits that while Polish American heterosexual women who take ownership of their sexuality through entering forbidden premarital or extramarital relations may avoid censure from a Polish American ethnic community, homosexuality seems invariably relegated to a separate queer diaspora.

The next two chapters bring the discussion of gendered and classed ethnicity forward to consider the developments of the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century. Chapter 7 analyzes several narratives, many of them written in Polish, by representatives of the latest large immigrant cohort, the so-called "Solidarity cohort," who left Poland for the United States and Canada as a result of the economic and political upheaval of the 1980s. This chapter argues that, just as the World War II émigré women are controlled by their Polish patriotic heritage, the "Solidarity" immigrants are constrained by the deeply rooted legacy of communist xenophobia, intolerance, and dubious morality. These fictional daughters of communist Poland firmly situate their identity at the intersection of whiteness, the middle class, and heterosexuality. Some of them achieve empowerment by marginalizing the racial and class "other" as well as by ignoring or actively breaking some of the most basic ethical rules with impunity. They perform their gendered ethnic identity within artificially constructed moveable relational homelands that can be transplanted from locale to locale without much effort.

Chapter 8 continues the examination of the "Solidarity cohort" by identifying within it two distinct generational groups—the first generation of immigrant parents and the "1.5 generation" of immigrant children. This chapter asserts that the writers from these two closely related yet distinct generations engage in a literary dialogue that defines the Polish American ethnic woman of the twenty-first century. This latest incarnation of the Polish American woman has the advantage of full acculturation to the mainstream, the benefits of middle-class whiteness and education, as well as freedom from ethnic patriarchy since she lives outside of an ethnic community. Even though the immigrant past still exerts powerful influence over her construction of gendered identity, her American present allows her to choose from a full range of ethnic options. The independent but also

isolated Polish American woman of the twenty-first century living in a community of one completes the trajectory of gendered ethnic identity over the last seventy or eighty years initiated by Monica Krawczyk.

The final chapter offers its own timeline and illustrates the development of Polish American young adult and children's narratives over the past fifty years. It posits that there exists a strong parallel between the models of gendered ethnicity in works for adults and for children and traces patterns of "girling," the socialization of girls into the role of a future Polish American woman and mother. The early works within this genre seem much less disruptive to the patriarchal status quo than the adult narratives. For the most part, they equate Polish ethnic identity with strong working-class identification and promote traditional Roman Catholic family ideology. Narratives that provide models of empowerment for working-class girls do not appear until the late twentieth century. The effects that social class has on the construction of gendered ethnicity are particularly visible in World War II stories about empowered and assertive upper-class girls.



Writing the Polish American Woman in Postwar Ethnic Fiction seeks to augment the historical and sociological analysis of Polish immigrant and ethnic women with a discussion of gender and ethnic constructs offered by literature, particularly in long and short fiction published after World War II. By highlighting the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic class, community, and nation within discursive contexts of both the ethnic and mainstream cultures of American diversity, ethnic fiction reveals a complex female construct that draws from both Polish and American traditions and represents its own brand of feminism. This literary gender construct amplifies the negative effects on ethnic women not only of the American objectification of their bodies within a tightly controlled patriarchy, but also of the trifurcated Polish social-class legacy: of peasant fatalism defined by passivity and piety; of the intelligentsia's model of heroism and patriotism embedded in the Matka-Polka ideal;⁸⁴ and, finally, of the communist model of a superwoman seamlessly combining a public-sphere career with a private-sphere devotion to family.⁸⁵ At the same time, the Polish American gender discourse is further complicated by American social and political turbulence of the last eighty years. Much of Polish American fiction focuses on

the tensions brought on by such compounded Polish and American pressures bearing down on women and presents numerous acts of resistance, rebellion, and defiance that allow ethnic women to achieve visibility, empowerment, and self-actualization within a hostile environment of double marginalization due to both gender and ethnicity.