

Sonia Caputa
University of Silesia in Katowice
soniacaputa@gmail.com

Immigrant Bodies and the Politics of Eugenics in Selected Literary Works Written by Contemporary Polish American Authors

The history of the eugenics movement in the United States is strictly interwoven with the processes of immigration, assimilation and naturalization. Well known are the attempts of American eugenicists (described widely by Alexandra Minna Stern in *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* published in 2005), who combined the Manifest Destiny doctrines of the 1840s with the 20th-century medical and scientific vocabulary in order to improve the genes of the American society. One of the results of the prevailing popularity of the principles voiced by the followers of the movement, who belonged to the country's dominant group, was the introduction of the strict immigration laws between 1891 and 1924. The eugenicists' preoccupation and obsession with the unhealthy and physically inferior immigrant bodies, which needed to be "reshaped" and "purified" in order to be Americanized, was especially prominent in the literary works of American ethnic writers (Anzia Yezierska, Mary Gordon), who published their short stories and novels at the beginning of the 20th century. However, the discomfort with the immigrant embodied selves also permeates the literary worlds of some of the contemporary Polish American authors. Taking into consideration the fact that literary immigrant bodies may be perceived as "repositories of [the newcomers'] cultures [and] serve as the microcosms of the homelands

they left behind,”¹ the main aim of the present article is to shed some light upon the images of the immigrant bodies in selected works of American authors of Polish descent.

Eugenics, as Alexandra Stern explains, is an elusive word that has had divergent connotations in different cultural and sociological contexts, and its meaning has undergone transformations over the last one hundred and twenty years. The term was coined in 1883 by Sir Francis Galton, a British statistician and Charles Darwin’s cousin, who defined eugenics as “the science which dealt with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the most advantage.”² The foundational definition, however, was reformulated in 1911 and, as a result, eugenics became widely known as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding.”³ Yet the operative word “better” raises perplexing moral and ideological questions concerning superiority, inferiority, abnormality, and the accepted norm within societies, as well as the role and restrictions of development or enforcement of the eugenic programs. Stern clarifies that “both supporters and detractors [of the movement] have linked eugenics to anxieties about biological deterioration and hopes for genetic optimization [and] over time these oscillating concerns have continuously affected our understanding of race, sexuality, reproduction, and nature.”⁴

Eugenicists incited anticipation, trepidation, and controversy in the United States, starting with the creation of the first sizeable eugenics organization, i.e. the Race Betterment Foundation, by John Harvey Kellogg in 1906, and ending with a ceremony held in 2002 in Oregon’s state capitol building where Governor John Kitzhaber apologized for “the more than twenty six hundred sterilizations performed in that state between 1917 and 1983.”⁵ John Harvey Kellogg⁶ became known as Dr. Kellogg, the inventor of the healthy breakfast regimen for the Anglo-Saxon race in the USA, i.e.

¹ June Dwyer, “Disease, Deformity and Defiance: Writing the Language of Immigration Law and the Eugenics Movement on the Immigrant Body,” *Melus*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2003), p. 105.

² Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 11.

³ Davenport, quoted in Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶ John Harvey Kellogg, a member of the Seventh Day Adventists, was inspired by the church’s spiritual director, Ellen White, who experienced visions and warned people of the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee. White’s long list of proscribed products and activities included meat, drugs, doctors, corsets, and unnatural sex. Kellogg became well known for his “University of Health,” i.e. Battle Creek Michigan Sanatorium, which was frequently visited by American celebrities of his era (e.g. President Taft, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Edgar Welch to name only a few), as well as for his defense of vegetarianism, emphasis put on nut-based meat substitutes, and the significance

cornflakes and peanut butter, which was widely adopted as the “proper” American diet among immigrant families. Culinary assimilation programs, which advocated the abandonment of the unhealthy (non-Anglo-Saxon) immigrant food traditions were especially popular during the first decades of the 20th century and operated in tandem with anti-immigrant/nativist sentiments.⁷ Initially, the focus of the eugenics movement in the United States was mainly on better breeding,⁸ i.e. “the application of biology and medicine to the perceived problems of modern society,”⁹ which resulted in the introduction of the aforementioned sterilization laws passed by state legislatures at the beginning of the 20th century (first in 1907 in Indiana, then in California, Vermont, Virginia—and altogether there were 33 states that at some point in the 20th century introduced sterilization statutes in the USA) in order to prevent so-called “morons,” “degenerates,” and the “feeble minded” from breeding in American society. Stern explains that the East Coast became the epicenter of the movement with two headquarters located in New York: the Eugenic Record Office which was opened in 1910, and the American Eugenics Society, which was founded in 1926 by the racist eugenicist Harry Laughlin; somewhat surprisingly the latter organization changed its name to the Society for the Study of Social Biology only in 1973.¹⁰ Apart from the ratification of sterilization statutes, whose aim was, apparently, to genetically protect/improve the Anglo Saxon race in the USA, another tangible proof of American (i.e. Anglo-normative center’s) fascination with eugenicist ideas¹¹ was the introduction of the restrictive anti-immigration laws, designed to “shield America from polluting germ plasm”¹² and to curb the influx of newcomers,

of thorough mastication (James Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness. The History of American Health Reformers* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982], pp. 201–205).

⁷ Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 54, 221.

⁸ James Whorton stresses the importance of “racial betterment” slogans popular during the Progressive decades among American hygienists, who shared eugenicists’ fear that the birthrate of the Anglo-Saxon group was falling and, therefore, stressed the need “to be healthy for the sake of the race.” Health reformers, however, believed that sanitary marriage and physical perfection was the key to a successful eradication of the alien elements (Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness*, p. 163).

⁹ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹ There existed two dominating health-related discourses at the end of the 19th century: biological racism and public health. On the one hand biological racism fostered the idea that non-whites were inferior in intelligence, ability, and appearance. On the other hand, “the field of public health characterized [for instance Chinese immigrants] as prone to contagious diseases because of their non-Western lifestyles and medical practices and their nonnormative gender and sexual formations” (Jennifer Barager Sibara, “Disease, Disability, and the Alien Body in Literature of Sui Sin Far,” *Melus*, Vol. 39, no. 1, spring 2014, p. 57).

¹² Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, p. 6.

very often described as the carriers of germs and, as far as immigrants from Poland are concerned, “the army of bacteria ready to infect healthy Americans”¹³ with infectious diseases. After World War II the followers of the phenomenon of eugenics (mainly, as Stern emphasizes, white middle-class Americans), to some extent, changed their target population, and concentrated on family planning, population control and genetic and marital counselling. Thus, the eugenics movement did not disappear completely in the 1940s but rather evolved or it was repackaged, having a different key mission on its agenda. The proponents’ focus shifted from the “undesirable individuals” to married heterosexual couples, who would amply procreate and contribute to the betterment of the nation. What seems significant is the fact that even though eugenics in the United States is frequently aligned with scientific racism, the movement had also some positive reforms included in its programs: eugenicists promoted healthy lifestyles and procreation via fitter family contests encouraging, thus, “fit” people living in agricultural regions to have larger families, or organizing state fairs which became venues for popular education.¹⁴ The advocates of the movement also contributed to improving the living conditions of Americans and to the development of prenatal care in the USA by means of the genetic testing programs.

In light of the above, it might be interesting to note that various literary images of the descendants of Polish immigrants to America, or Poles in general, portrayed by Polish American writers, are perfect examples of what June Dwyer calls “the catalogues of negative attributes describing the immigrant body,” and such portrayals might be literary responses to “the interplay between laws and nativism,”¹⁵ which had a powerful impact on many immigrant groups over more than a hundred years of American history. Dwyer conducts an analysis of the stories written by the Jewish immigrant writer Anzia Yezierska and the third-generation Irish immigrant Mary Gordon; she shows that both of them appear preoccupied with the effects of nativist sentiment on the immigrant body. What Dwyer concludes, however, is that “immigrant body in America is [depicted as] unhealthy—unable and unfit to move into the established American society”¹⁶ and “the official language of the law [alluding to the American

¹³ Andrzej Kapiszewski, *Stereotyp Amerykanów polskiego pochodzenia* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1978), p. 80. Trans. S. Caputa.

¹⁴ M. Ladd-Taylor, “Fitter Family Contests,” April 29, 2014, accessed April 1, 2018, <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/535eebf7095aa0000>.

¹⁵ Dwyer, “Disease,” p. 106.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

immigration statutes, pseudo-science of eugenics and immigration law restrictions] influenced the way immigrants saw themselves.”¹⁷ According to Dwyer, the discomfort of immigrants with themselves is an important strain in their literature and even those literary works which touch upon the topic of immigration and which were produced at the end of the 20th century provide “testimony that the aura of disease, deviance, and deformity around immigrants did not diffuse easily.”¹⁸ Taking into consideration the fact that the eugenics movement advocated social engineering, and its proponents wanted to better society through the latest application of scientific knowledge, it was concluded that heredity played a key role in spawning social pathologies, disease and immoral actions,¹⁹ and immigrants became easy targets of professional and amateur advocates of this “science.”

A statute from 1917 posed restrictions on the admittance of immigrants to the US, closing the gates to the New World to “idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons; persons who [had] more than one or more attacks of insanity at any time previously; [and] persons of constitutional psychopathic inferiority.”²⁰ Additionally, more emphasis was put on intelligence testing conducted at Ellis Island and meticulously described with all its flaws by Stephen Jay Gould in the 1996 revised edition of *The Mismeasure of Man*. The underlying message inscribed in the immigration laws at the beginning of the 20th century became “amplified [...] by prominent members of the dominant group, many of [whom] had a minimal sociological or scientific knowledge”²¹ and still resonates in the literary works created by American ethnic writers.²²

If one delves into the literary works penned by American authors of Polish descent, one may be startled by the vivid kaleidoscope of immigrant characters who yearn to become part of the American nation but, for various reasons, feel that they do not belong. Their inability to adapt to

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁹ Degler, quoted in Dwyer, “Disease,” p. 107.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 108.

²¹ Ibid., p. 109.

²² An interesting example of what may be perceived as the amplification of the anti-immigrant sentiments in literature is the story of the Kallikak Family, the most visible eugenicist narrative, penned by psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard which was published in 1912. J. David Smith and Michael L. Wehmeyer explain that this pseudo-scientific treatise became so popular that the Kallikak story, or in fact the prefabricated version of the life of Emma Wolverton, electrified the public and the character of Deborah/Emma herself functioned as the embodiment of the threat to American racial hygiene (David J. Smith and Michael L. Wehmeyer, “Who Was Deborah Kallikak?” in: *Intellect Dev Disabil*, Vol. 50, No. 2 [2012], pp. 169–178).

the American society sometimes results from cherished exotic Old World customs and traditions, or oftentimes is triggered by their obsessive Catholic devotion, but the lack of acceptance can also be caused by the immigrants' or the descendants of immigrants' physical deformations or mental impairment. Intentionally or not, the novels or short stories created by Polish-American writers such as Stuart Dybek, Leslie Pietrzyk, Karolina Waclawiak, Dagmara Dominczyk, and Suzanne Strempek Shea reenact or respond to the rhetoric of immigration laws and the eugenics movement. The present article focuses on selected literary works of three of these authors, i.e. Stuart Dybek,²³ Dagmara Dominczyk,²⁴ and Suzanne Strempek Shea.²⁵

Taking a closer look at the short stories written by Stuart Dybek, the reader may observe that very few of the Polish Americans, if any, are three-dimensional "normals," using Thomas Gladsky's term.²⁶ Most of the immigrant Poles and their descendants may be described as grotesques living in a distorted landscape. What is more, it seems that the majority of Dybek's characters have acquiesced in the constructions of themselves as diseased, deformed, or even mentally unstable. There are protagonists who may be easily defined as madmen, such as the "grunting, lip-farting, pantomiming tremendous explosions"²⁷ character from "Blood Soup." There is Kashka Marishka, the character from "Live from Dreamsville," who befriends various demented winos in the Polish-American neighborhood

²³ Stuart Dybek belongs to the group of first writers of Polish descent to receive national recognition; he was awarded multiple literary awards (Bernard Malamud Prize, a Whiting Writers' Award), and is a recipient of a lifetime achievement award from the Academy of Arts and Letters. Dybek is a short story writer, (*Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* [published in 1980], *Coast of Chicago* [published in 1990], *I Sailed with Magellan* [published in 2003], *Ecstatic Cahoots: Fifty Short Stories*, *Paper Lantern* [both published in 2014], and *The Start of Something: Selected Stories of Stuart Dybek* [published in 2016]). He also produced a volume of poetry entitled *Brass Knuckles* (published in 1979) and a collection of poetry *Streets in Their Own Ink* (published in 2004). Don Lee, "About Stuart Dybek. A Profile," *Ploughshares – The Literary Journal at Emerson College*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1998), accessed January 18, 2019, <http://www.pshares.org/issues/article.cfm?prmArticleID=4466>.

²⁴ Dagmara Dominczyk is known as a Polish American actress appearing in numerous film, TV and theatre productions rather than a serious writer of fiction. Her engaging debut novel, however, published in 2013 and entitled *The Lullaby of Polish Gils*, received positive feedback from literary critics. Grażyna J. Kozaczka, "Writing Poland and America: Polish American Fiction in the Twenty-First Century," *Polish American Studies*, Vol. LXXIII, No. 1 (Spring 2016), p. 81.

²⁵ Suzanne Strempek Shea is the winner of the 2000 New England Book Award for Fiction, the author of the novels *Selling the Lite of Heaven*, *Hoopi Shoopi Donna*, *Lily of the Valley*, and *Around Again*, and the memoirs *Songs from a Lead-Lined Room: Notes—High and Low—From My Journey Through Breast Cancer and Radiation*, and *Shelf Life: Romance, Mystery, Drama, and Other Page-Turning Adventures from a Year in a Bookstore*.

²⁶ Thomas Gladsky, *Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves. Ethnicity in American Literature* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 258.

²⁷ Stuart Dybek, *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 44.

and lives with her husband Janush, who “miss[es] half his teeth,”²⁸ the exaggerated physical features of the woman turning her into a typical grotesque character. The narrator describes Kashka as follows:

[a woman] built like a squat sumo wrestler. She had the heaviest upper arms [...], rolls of flab wider than most people’s thighs, folding like sleeves over her elbows. She didn’t have titties, she had watermelons.²⁹

Sometimes the descendants of Polish immigrants are presented as immoral and ill-made, as in the short story “The Cat Woman,” where Old Buzka and her crazy grandson Swantek (a brawling drunk who “got crazier as she got older”³⁰) drown unwanted neighborhood cats in their washing machine. Swantek also appears in “Sauerkraut Soup” and is described as a twelve-year old boy, who “was more psychotic than any other person”³¹ in the whole neighborhood. It seems that Dybek constantly shows the mental and physical deformations of his protagonists’ bodies, especially those bodies which belong to the descendants of Poles. For instance Swantek is seen “crouching naked by the chimney on the peak of his roof,”³² while the immigrant workers in the ice factory are “Slavs missing parts of hands and arms that had been chewed off while trying to clean machines that hadn’t been properly disconnected.”³³ A similarly weird image of the Polish descendant whose body exhibits some conditions of malformation is offered in another short story entitled “Hot Ice.” Dybek mentions the Polish-sounding names of the most notorious prisoners of the local jail. Among them is Milo Hermanski, “who had stabbed some guy in the eye,” and “Ziggy [Zillinsky]’s uncle, [...] who one day blew off the side of Ziggy’s mother’s face while she stood ironing her slip.”³⁴

Dybek depicts physical differences and bodily deformations of his characters also in a short story “Chopin in Winter.” The protagonist, *Dzia-Dzia*, who is called by his wife *Pan Djabel* (Mr. Devil), possesses soles which are constantly “swollen nearly shapeless and cased in scaly calluses.”³⁵ The narrator adds that his “nails, yellow, as a horse’s teeth, grew gnarled

²⁸ Stuart Dybek, *I Sailed with Magellan* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Dybek, *Childhood*, p. 22.

³¹ Stuart Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), p. 132.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³⁴ Dybek, *Childhood*, p. 133.

³⁵ Dybek, *The Coast*, p. 10.

from knobbed toes,”³⁶ and “white tufts of hair sprout from his ears.”³⁷ It appears that the more one sinks into the literary world of Dybek’s literary neighborhood, the more preposterous and whimsical images of Polish-Americans come into view. The central character of “Blue Boy,” for instance, is Ralphie Poskozim, who was born a blue baby, i.e. “his body was covered with bruises, as if he was sucking on a ballpoint pen and his fingers were smeared with the same blue ink.”³⁸ Dybek’s literary characters include also Cyril Bombrowski, who has had a metal plate implanted in his head, Michael the Wild Goral, who “worked at his teeth with a pair of pliers, trying to pull the stubs out of his bloody gums so he wouldn’t have to pay a dentist,”³⁹ or Big Antek, the local wino, who used to be a butcher but “drunkenly kept hacking off pieces of his hands, and finally quit completely to become a full-time alky.”⁴⁰

In light of the above,⁴¹ the bodies of Dybek’s protagonists become a source of anxiety, trepidation, and nausea but the ethnics, whose bodies are described, seem to perform in a certain, prefabricated manner because “for ethnic subjects of any sort, [...] the body is always a highly determined entity, [t]he dominant society writes scripts of subjectivity onto this space, often involving hypersexuality [...], violence, [...] warmth, rage or joy, and other affective states.”⁴² It seems that by bringing diseased and disabled characters to the center of his fiction, Dybek accommodates the intersection of prejudice, disability, and racism. Apart from the fact that the characters from his collections of short stories, especially published before 2014, reveal the symptoms of racial contamination, they are also described as filthy, uncouth, mentally unstable, or not being able to maintain proper hygiene. In other words, they fit into the category of phenomena designated by white authorities at the turn of the 20th century as unhealthy and insane, which was equal with not granting permission to enter the United States.

Rarely do the bodies of Dybek’s characters seem to be the bearers of the complex histories of trauma and violence, but if they do, they are usually

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁸ Dybek, *I Sailed*, p. 123.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Dybek, *The Coast*, p. 126.

⁴¹ The above two paragraphs appeared in a modified version in: Sonia Caputa, “Pan Gowumpe, Busha and Stefush—Images of Polish Americans and the ‘Polish’ fiction of Stuart Dybek,” in: *PASE Papers 2007*, Vol. 2: *Studies in Culture and Literature*, eds. Wojciech Kalaga, Marzena Kubisz, Jacek Mydla (Katowice: Agencja Artystyczna PARA Zenon Dyrszka, 2007), pp. 53–63.

⁴² Martha Cutter, “Rescripting Ethnic Bodies and Subjectivities,” *Melus*, Vol. 39, no. 1, (spring 2014), p. 1.

associated with the Second World War. In this context, one may allude to some characters depicted in a short “Blue Boy”, i.e. Polish-American cripples who clannishly reside with the Czechs:

A procession of the disabled from the parish emerged from the alley. A couple of World War II vets, mainstays from the bar and the VFW club, one with a prosthetic hook and the other with no discernible wound other than the alcoholic staggers. [...] It was a parade of at most a dozen, but it seemed larger—enough of a showing so that onlookers could imagine the battalions of wounded soldiers who weren’t there, and the victims of accidents, industrial otherwise, the survivors of polio and strokes, all the exiles who avoided the streets, who avoided the baptism of being street-named after their afflictions, recluses who kept their suffering behind doors, women like Maria Savoy, who’d been lighting a water heater when it exploded, or Agnes Lutensky, who remained cloistered years after her brother blew off half her face with a shotgun during an argument over a will. [...] With their canes, crutches, and the wheelchair, it looked more like a pilgrimage to Lourdes than a parade.⁴³

The imprinting of violence onto the ethnic bodies may also come from within the ethnic community (e.g. as a result of street fights between literary Polish-American ethnic characters), but these may also be the acts of self-mutilation or self-inflicted injuries (e.g. protagonists pull out their teeth, chop off their hands, or blow off different parts of the body with weapons). Finally, Dybek also depicts the bodies of Polish Americans marked by some abnormalities as a consequence of work-related accidents and this usually was the work in industries that were perceived as too dangerous for WASPs. These are only some of the many examples of Dybek’s horrifying images of literary Polish Americans, whose bodies and ethnicity contribute to and increase their strangeness.

The physical inferiority of Polish people is also visible in Dagmara Dominczyk’s acclaimed novel *The Lullaby of Polish Girls*, published in 2013, where the author skillfully captures the harsh Polish reality of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Poland is a country of “people who, despite being in [their] mid-thirties have no teeth,”⁴⁴ where “everyone smokes and laughs, but nobody smiles unless they really mean it,”⁴⁵ where “boys (with legs so skinny that it makes [one] sad, those giant knees) and girls are alike—clad in polyester short shorts and open-toed sandals”⁴⁶; the author also describes

⁴³ Dybek, *I Sailed*, p. 59.

⁴⁴ Dagmara Dominczyk, *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* (London: Quercus Editions Ltd., 2013), p. 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

the *Tęcza* swimming pool in Kielce, “swarming with folks looking for relief, nobody is willowy; even the thin women give off a sense of largesse,”⁴⁷ but “in the sea of shiny Slavic faces, no one wears sunglasses and no one cares about the fact that their swimwear looks decades old.”⁴⁸ Taking a closer look at the descriptions of Poles in Dominczyk’s novel, one may admit that the narrator’s gaze is the eugenic gaze that wants to pigeonhole Polish people, improve them if possible. A similar conclusion may be drawn if one pays attention to the portrayal of the protagonist of the novel, Anna Baran, who used to be a successful Broadway actress, but whose acting career has somewhat stalled, and despite being a “Slavic-looking Marilyn Monroe,”⁴⁹ she is on the verge of mental breakdown. Dominczyk’s Polish American does not entirely fit into the motion-picture-making Hollywood machine that requires film stars to be perfectly slim and beautiful if they want to bask in financial autonomy. Hence, Baran is given a piece of advice by her managers:

Get a trainer. If you can’t afford one right now, we’ll help you out, naturally. But you need to lose it, fast and furious. The point is, we support you, we believe in you. But we must do everything to get back to you. Starve yourself if you have to, I don’t care.⁵⁰

Immigrant bodies as sites of moral turpitude are also depicted in Suzanne Strempek Shea’s novel *Hoopi Shoopi Donna*, published in 1996. Strempek Shea, often described as the Amy Tan of the Polish American community,⁵¹ is a prolific writer, whom Gladsky defines as “the first to sell, the first to attract a large readership, and the first to be enthusiastically accepted and praised within the ethnic community.”⁵² Urszula Tempska claims that even though Strempek Shea’s fiction might be characterized by containing “deadpan humor, [...] unaffected language, kitchen-table realism and quirky fantasy,”⁵³ its subject matter, narrative plotting,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵¹ Margaret Carlin as quoted in the 1996 edition of *Hoopi Shoopi Donna*.

⁵² Thomas Gladsky, “Marketing Ethnicity: The Case of Suzanne Strempek Shea,” *The Polish Review*, Vol. XL-VIII, No. 3 (2003), p. 318.

⁵³ Urszula Tempska, “From (Ethnic) Mama’s Girl to Her Own (New Ethnic) Woman: Gender and Ethnicity in Suzanne Strempek Shea’s *Selling The Lite of Heaven*,” in: *Something of My Very Own to Say: American Women Writers of Polish Descent*, eds. Thomas S. Gladsky and Rita Holmes Gladsky (Boulder: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 287.

themes, and motifs forcefully solicit comparisons with the fiction of Anzia Yeziarska, Mary Antin, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Louise Erdrich.⁵⁴

The plot of *Hoopi Shoopi Donna* is set in the Connecticut River valley of Western Massachusetts, which is believed to be the largest agrarian Polish community in the United States. Strempek Shea's literary Polish Americans, with a few exceptions, unapologetically spend their entire lives within the blue-collar community, and they are unfit to adapt to the host culture as their bodies are not healthy enough to be embraced by mainstream Americans. Adam Milewski, the main character's father, "had that one gold tooth that you could see [...] and when he laughed hard enough that his head tilted back, two other ones normally out of view would shine the same metal"⁵⁵; Dorota, a neighborhood girl, had a "foot split last spring by the neighbour's plow,"⁵⁶ Pawel Bialowicz "had two small bumps on the side of his left hand that were really sixth and seventh fingers,"⁵⁷ Paul Korvak "had a carved piece of wood that was his right hand,"⁵⁸ Bobby Smoła's sister "wore a hearing aid,"⁵⁹ and Donna Milewski, the protagonist of the book, has a visible mark that renders her different from non-Polish Americans, i.e. "a reddish pink scar [on her forehead] that grew scarlet,"⁶⁰ which she obtained as a result of a car accident. In one of the central scenes of the novel, Donna notices that all of her boyfriends possess some signs of physical inferiority:

Whoever it had been, whatever they thought they saw, they each would want to show me their own gashes and slashes and gouges left from knuckles slammed in car doors, from bare feet that found the one rusty nail in all the boardwalk, from dogs that didn't know that somebody was just playing, from a glass dropped into a swimming pool [...] a cyst at the nape of a neck that had taken nearly three years to heal. Some of these victims should have received stitches, only there was nobody to take them to doctor. [...] Others were worked on by doctors who were overly enthusiastic and who used many more stitches that you'd think were needed, or who were so skilled that you could hardly locate the scar, but it was there, the guy would promise, if you'd only look closer and closer and closer.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Grażyna J. Kozaczka, "The Invention of Ethnicity and Gender in Suzanne Strempek Shea's Fiction," in: *The Polish Review*, vol. XLVIII, no. 3 (2003), p. 327.

⁵⁵ Suzanne Strempek Shea, *Hoopi Shoopi Donna* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1996), p. 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

The American desire to control or modify the immigrants' and immigrant children's behavior, or to reshape their bodies, pervades Strempek Shea's novel. In order to succeed, one needs to conform to the norms imposed by the dominant group but, regardless of their efforts, the scar is always there "if you look closer and closer and closer" as Strempek Shea's protagonist confesses. Therefore, it seems that the only recourse left for a great number of Polish-American literary characters, afflicted with the most unusual kinds of physical drawbacks, people who are morally suspect or even associated with social pathology, is to clannishly reside in their neighborhood, which is relegated to the outskirts, because they are not fit enough and the gaze of superiority is always there.

Despite the fact that the literary works analyzed in the present article are only works of fiction, which are not to be taken as psychological studies of Polish American ethnic groups, they still, in an indirect manner and between the lines, intentionally or not, inform the readership about the need to belong and conform to the Anglo-Saxon standards. Stuart Dybek, Dagmara Dominczyk, and Suzanne Strempek Shea encompass in their fiction physical and mental impairments of Poles and their descendants. The authors provide examples of what it takes to be American citizens and how significant it is to possess healthy bodies in order to become ones.

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Immigrant Bodies and the Politics of Eugenics in Selected Literary Works Written by Contemporary Polish American Authors

The history of the eugenics movement in the United States is strictly interwoven with the processes of immigration, assimilation and naturalization. Well known are the attempts of American eugenicists (described widely by Alexandra Minna Stern in *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, published in 2005), who combined the Manifest Destiny doctrines of the 1840s with the twentieth century medical and scientific vocabulary in order to improve the genes of the American society. One of the results of the prevailing popularity of the principles voiced by the followers of the movement, who belonged to the country's dominant group, was the introduction of strict immigration laws between 1891 and 1924. The eugenicists' preoccupation and obsession with unhealthy and physically inferior immigrant bodies, which needed to be 'reshaped' and 'purified' in order to be Americanized, was especially prominent in the literary works of American ethnic writers (Anzia Yezierska, Mary Gordon), who published their short stories and novels at the beginning of the twentieth century. However,

the discomfort with the immigrant embodied selves also permeates the literary worlds of some of the contemporary Polish American authors. Taking into consideration the fact that literary immigrant bodies may be perceived as “repositories of [the newcomers’] cultures [and] serve as the microcosms of the homelands they left behind,”⁶² the main aim of the present article is to shed some light upon the images of the immigrant bodies in selected works of American authors of Polish descent.

Keywords: immigrant body, eugenics, American authors of Polish descent

Słowa kluczowe: ciało, emigrant, eugenika, amerykańscy autorzy pochodzenia polskiego

⁶² June Dwyer, “Disease, Deformity and Defiance: Writing the Language of Immigration Law and the Eugenics Movement on the Immigrant Body,” *Melus*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2003), p. 105.

