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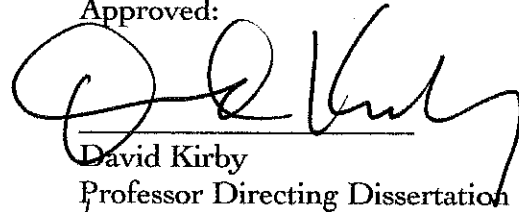
AMERICAN ACCENT

By

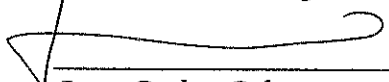
DOMINIKA WROZYNSKI

A prospectus for a Dissertation
Submitted to the
Department of English
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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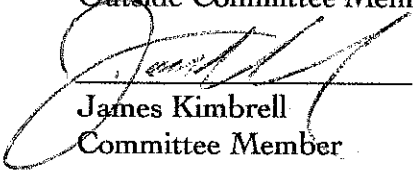
Approved:




David Kirby
Professor Directing Dissertation



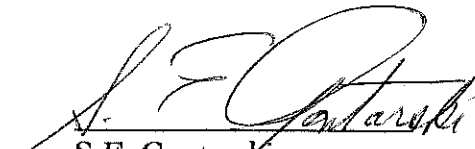
Juan Carlos Galeano
Outside Committee Member



James Kimbrell
Committee Member



Barry Faulk
Committee Member



S.E. Gontarski
Director of Graduate Studies

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Dominika Wrozyński

Copy of prospectus for Dr. Gontarski

The poems in the dissertation manuscript, *American Accent*, are a unification of the hybrid identity of their writer. The poems explore what it means to be American — both geographically and mentally — for a Polish-American émigré writer. Although the poems in this collection are rooted in the tradition of contemporary American poetry, it is difficult to place them in a further category, as the canon of American poetry has not yet moved past the “contemporary” label. Critics simply do not know yet what comes next.

It may be more advantageous, therefore, to engage the search for place and identity undertaken by the poems’ speaker. This search is aptly presented in the research of Thomas S. and Rita Holmes Gladsky, who center their anthology, *Something of My Very Own To Say: American Women Writers of Polish Descent*, on the mental and physical exile of American women writers of Polish descent. Their anthology details “a profound sense of otherness—that one is no longer a Polish woman and not quite an American woman,” (6). It is this sense of “otherness” that manifests itself throughout this dissertation, both in the subjects of the poems, as well as in the personal life of their writer. The America that emerges in this dissertation of contemporary poetry is a focused exploration of hybrid identity, divided primarily into three distinct sections.

Section I, “Spending the Night, Once Again, In My Mother’s House,” contains poems that address the speaker’s mother and imagine the mother’s life in Poland (prior to her immigration to America), as well as her life after immigration. Poems such as “My Mother Receives Her Citizenship,” and the title poem of the section, “Spending

the Night, Once Again, In My Mother's House," are especially concerned with the mother's life after immigration. This section is further unified by the recurring theme of the mother's missing arm. Multiple poems, such as "Poland, 1945," address the event in which the mother lost the arm—World War II. This examination of the speaker's mother is a necessary preface to the development of the speaker's voice throughout the remainder of the dissertation. It is a way to connect the speaker's Polish origins to her current identity as a hybrid American. The poems in this first section of the dissertation reflect what Halina Filipowicz, in "Fission and Fusion: Polish Émigré Literature," dubs as a "looking homeward": "The looking homeward may be an act of critical scrutiny of the individual and collective past. It may also be an almost ritualistic act of self-renewal by rescuing the past for the present and the future" (167). Section I traces the origins of the speaker by tracing the complex identity of her family—once Polish, now Polish-American. These poems serve as a way for the speaker to bear witness to political and historical events, as experienced by the microcosm of her family.

In Section II, "The Days Between," the speaker constructs her version of America from the quotidian relationships around her. The poems in this section are thematically wide-ranging and encompass topics such as the speaker's wonder at the love bug phenomenon that occurs bi-annually in Florida ("Living in Florida, I Have Replaced *Cicada* with *Love Bug*"), to the uncertainties faced by lovers who are separated by war ("Retrieval"), to everything in-between ("The Days Between"). The speaker is still bearing witness to the world around her ("Train Accident in Austin, Texas"), and though these poems are not centered specifically on the Polish-American immigrant experience, they are still a way for her to further her understanding of the America in

which she now lives. The poems in this section reflect the sentiments Czeslaw Milosz includes in his Nobel Prize lecture when he says: "'To see' means not only to have before one's eyes. It may also mean to preserve in memory. 'To see and to describe' may also mean to reconstruct in imagination." The "imaginative reconstructions" in this section serve as yet another development in the identity of the speaker, and they also prepare the reader for the geographical shift that occurs in Section III.

In Section III, "The New Mexico Poems," the first shift that is evident immediately is one of place—these poems are all set in various areas of New Mexico. This section is a marriage of the speaker's search for identity (most evident in Section I), and her focus on the extraordinary elements of the quotidian (in Section II). In this proverbial "land of enchantment," clandestine rooster fights ("Cock Fight") are as common as cutting one's Christmas tree from a mesa ("New Mexico Love Poem"). At the center of this section are six poems that all concern the antics of a popular-culture 80's heartthrob—Patrick Swayze—and his life in New Mexico. Though the paths of the speaker and Patrick Swayze never actually cross ("Patrick Swayze in New Mexico: Star Sightings You Don't Write Home About"), his experiences with local customs and people become a way for the speaker to examine her own role in the ever-divisive land and water grant issues that face residents of New Mexico. The character of Patrick Swayze thus becomes a foil for the speaker; because he is the protagonist in the poems, however, he is also able to deflect the attention from the speaker's personal experiences onto experiences that are much more centered on a specific American geographical region and its occupants.

The speaker's development of her hybrid identity is the thematic content of this dissertation; however, a variety of stylistic and formal decisions are also present in the

following poems. Most of the poems are written in free verse which, as John Drury writes in *The Poetry Dictionary*, "is as old as the Bible, whose long verses are not metrical, though they are structured according to repetition and variation of words and phrases" (112). The following poems are thus structured with careful attention paid to the techniques of the enjambment of lines and stanzas, anaphora, assonance, consonance, internal rhyme schemes, and many other formal free verse techniques. Another sampling of the following poems employs conceptual forms, such as elegies and odes, while yet a third explores the sonnet ("Albuquerque Hot-Air Balloon Fiesta").

Of particular interest may be the use of the Polish language in various poems. It is the speaker's wonder at, and fear of, her native language that take center stage in the poem "My Mother's Biography," for example. Since the Polish language is a tool that has tremendous significance in the bearing of witness for the speaker (and the writer), its inclusion in various poems is not surprising. The stifling of language by a communist regime was the reality for Polish immigrants, and the effects of losing this language and regaining it only upon arrival in America, is a significant development in the identity of the poems' speaker and her family. As Hans Christian Trepte writes in "Switching Languages in Émigré Literature," "in emigration language cannot easily function as the guarantor of national identity or culture. Language is treated more and more as a mediator or bridge between different cultures and civilizations," (216). The Polish language in this dissertation serves as a cultural insight into the world of the speaker and, in particular, of her mother. Just as the free verse form serves to impart various pieces of the speaker's search for identity, Polish mixes with English and shapes the poems found in *American Accent*.

Works Cited

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