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Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska, *Koloniści z Rio Claro: Społeczno-językowe światy polskich osadników w południowej Brazylii*, Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2024, 326 pp.

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Abstract

This article is a review of Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska's book *Koloniści z Rio Claro: Społeczno-językowe światy polskich osadników w południowej Brazylii* [Colonists of Rio Claro: Socio-Linguistic Worlds of Polish Settlers in Southern Brazil], published in 2024 by słowo/obraz terytoria; ISBN: 978-83-8325-092-2.

Keywords: socio-linguistic world; Polish diaspora; cultural heritage; ethnography

Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska's book *Koloniści z Rio Claro: Społeczno-językowe światy polskich osadników w południowej Brazylii* [Colonists of Rio Claro: Socio-Linguistic Worlds of Polish Settlers in Southern Brazil] (Bielenin-Lenczowska, 2024) provides a rich ethnographic and socio-linguistic examination of the Polish diaspora in southern Brazil. This work makes

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an important contribution to migration studies, linguistic anthropology, and heritage studies by exploring intersections of language, identity, and belonging. It focuses on descendants of Polish settlers who emigrated from nineteenth-century Polish lands under Russian and Austro-Hungarian rule, drawing on prior research into overseas Polish communities. The book is grounded in socio-cultural and linguistic anthropology, and analyzes language practices, ideologies, transidiomatic communication, cultural heritage, food patrimonialization, and related agricultural practices.

Bielenin-Lenczowska conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Rio Claro do Sul and its surrounding regions over several years. What began as a family tourist visit evolved into repeated returns for research among descendants of Polish migrants. Her multi-method approach combines participant observation, informal interactions, interviews, and analysis of linguistic practices and cultural heritage, allowing her to navigate the complexities of Polish identities across generations. The theoretical framework draws on anthropological and sociolinguistic concepts, such as language ideologies, cultural landscapes, and patrimonialization, adapted to the diasporic context.

The author's recurring reflections on the fieldwork process, from short visits relying on communication in Polish to a two-year stay in Brazil as a visiting professor, offer valuable insights into the gradual immersion in the field. The reflections on changing research conditions before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic emphasize that fieldwork is rarely linear. Gaining fluency in Portuguese gave her access to *Polono-Brazilian identity*, as it allowed her to engage with descendants of Polish settlers who no longer speak Polish and other members of the local community. Using semi-structured interviews, she captured diverse perspectives on identity and heritage while remaining open to emerging themes. Her methodology also included visual methods, such as photography and mapping, alongside archival research using newspapers, letters, photo archives, and schoolbooks. However, as she notes, such materials were limited, partly due to the migrants' illiteracy and the fact that private archives have largely not been preserved.

A key theme of the book is the role of language in maintaining and transforming Polish identity in Brazil. Bielenin-Lenczowska challenges traditional dialectological approaches that focus on linguistic "purity", instead highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of language use. She examines bilingualism, code-switching, and the emergence of Polish-Brazilian dialects in Portuguese-dominated environments, e.g. the book includes passages from interviews showcasing an intriguing mix of Polish and Portuguese, illustrating how these linguistic practices are embedded in everyday life and cultural rituals. These findings reveal both pride in and ambivalence about how Polish is remembered, forgotten, or adapted across generations.

The book also explores how cultural heritage is preserved and transformed within the diaspora. Practices such as cultivating "Polish" crops, preparing traditional dishes like *pierogi* 'dumplings', and celebrating religious and folkloric events illustrate how Polishness is actively negotiated and redefined in the Brazilian context.

The socio-linguistic landscape, a central analytical category in the book, illustrates how Polish language use in a country with an official monolingual ideology intertwines with social landscapes and localized cultural practices. The author explores language choices within families – such as using Polish before children start school in Portuguese – and reflects on community responses to hearing "classical Polish" from her own family during fieldwork.

Bielenin-Lenczowska interrogates what it means to be "Polish", questioning essentialist definitions and emphasizing the multiplicity of diasporic experiences and their relationality. For many migrants from rural eastern Galicia, the concept of Poland was secondary to their immediate localities, villages, and regions of origin. However, for diasporic activists and Brazilian administration, the point of reference remains Poland, overshadowing the localized identities that shaped migrants' and their descendants' sense of self. Needless to say, the concept of Polishness has varied across time and space. How was it understood in the mid-nineteenth century among the rural communities of Galicia, from which many of these migrants originated, and how is it understood now, as it is rediscovered, reconstructed, and reimagined – often with the help of mass media and visits to Poland? This tension underscores the complexity of Polish diasporic identity.

The questions "What does it mean to be Polish?" and "What is Polishness?" are central to many migration researchers studying Polish diasporas. Bielenin-Lenczowska argues that these questions have no simple answer, as attempts to define these concepts would be reductive. Instead, the book allows space for personal interpretations, as exemplified by one respondent's statement: "Brazil is my mother, but Poland is my grandmother."

One of the book's strengths lies in the author's ability to guide readers through these nuanced and complex identities with remarkable sensitivity, yet without unnecessary sentimentality. Drawing on Larissa Drabeski's concept of *Polono-Brazilian identity*, the book explores how such identities continue to evolve. For instance, the relationship with the ancestral homeland is undergoing transformation, shaped by new technologies and opportunities, such as learning Polish online. Modern tools often expose learners to teachers whose language differs significantly from the inherited forms of Polish spoken by their relatives. This dynamic illustrates the ongoing, multifaceted negotiation of identity within the diasporic context.

The exploration of the complex *socio-linguistic landscape* is the book's most innovative contribution. Bielenin-Lenczowska extends the concept of the linguistic landscape to include not only visible signs but also sounds, smells, and other sensory dimensions. This multisensory approach reveals how language and culture are interwoven into the physical and symbolic fabric of rural southern Brazil, from church bells to agricultural practices – all of which can only be fully uncovered through immersive fieldwork.

The sensory elements of fieldwork – smells, tastes, and landscapes – play a key role in signifying "Polishness" and are central to her multisensory approach. This perspective resonates with studies like those of Desille and Nikielska-Sekuła (2024), who explore

how Polish migrants recreate traditional dishes to maintain connections to their homeland while adapting to local contexts. Finally, it must be emphasized that this particular area of social life is highly gender-dependent. Time spent in the household and kitchen is where recipes are shared – often orally rather than in writing – where the language is spoken, secrets are exchanged, songs are sung, prayers are said, and foodways are recreated, innovated upon, practiced, and passed down among women in the community. This analysis is particularly compelling, as it highlights the gendered nature of these practices. For example, in the post-deportation context of the Ukrainian minority in Poland, Aleksandra Herman (2020) similarly demonstrates how traditions, including culinary memory, are transmitted among women.

The book also addresses the emotional and symbolic role of food in connecting the descendants of Polish migrants to their ancestral homeland. Traditional Polish dishes, such as dumplings, serve as cultural signifiers of Polishness. The author shares how her own knowledge of dumpling-making was scrutinized and evaluated against local culinary traditions, which illustrates how food serves as both a carrier of tradition and a means of negotiating identity. This analysis aligns with broader theories of cultural and ethnic boundary maintenance (Barth, 1969; Eriksen, 2010), and it highlights how sensory practices help domesticate spaces and create a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska's long-term engagement with the community allowed her to build strong relationships with research participants, fostering trust and access to personal narratives. Her participant observation involved active participation in community events, agricultural activities, and religious rituals, and thus provided a comprehensive understanding of daily life. Considering that she was accompanied by her family, her immersion in the local community was different from what it would have been had she conducted research alone. This positionality – as a researcher, a woman, a wife, and a mother – played an important role in the field.

Reflection on the role of coincidence in research is particularly relatable, as she emphasizes that many key discoveries arise from chance meetings, casual conversations, small talk, and intuition. Her decision to conduct fieldwork in Rio Claro do Sul, described by an interlocutor as a place where "real Polish language and traditions" are preserved, illustrates how openness to unexpected opportunities shapes ethnographic work. Immersion in the field required time, patience, and effort – mundane visits, small talk, formal interviews, and participant observation – all of which are integral to fieldwork. She emphasizes that ethnographic work is a sensory experience, where researchers learn not only about the community but also about themselves, confronting their own biases and reflecting on the process of immersion. The author openly addresses the discomforts and demands of fieldwork – exposure to unfamiliar stimuli, such as smells and tastes. It is sleeping in strange beds and eating unfamiliar food, adapting to different daily rhythms, and compromising one's comfort for certain periods of time. Yet, it is also fascinating, stimulating, and both emotionally and intellectually satisfying. The author describes how a coincidental fasci-

nation with the topic developed into a deep and long-lasting research engagement – one fueled by curiosity, passion, and professional commitment. This engagement is reflected in efforts such as learning a new language and building professional relationships with scientific institutes in the country where she did her fieldwork. Ethical challenges accompany prolonged fieldwork, particularly as relationships with community members deepen. These reflections, detailed in the methodological chapter, provide invaluable guidance for ethnographers, particularly those new to the field.

At the same time, Bielenin-Lenczowska reflects on her position as an engaged researcher, whose constant curiosity about the field and desire to learn go hand in hand with a genuine commitment to the significant issues faced by the community she studies. This is particularly important in an era when engaged research is often criticized from normative or so-called objective positions. Moreover, the author is mindful of existing inequalities and her own privilege, leveraging her skills and position to support the local community – for instance, by assisting in their efforts to document the lives of their ancestors from Polish lands in Brazil or by offering practical advice.

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly altered her mode of working, shifting much of her interaction with the community online. While the author views e-ethnography as supplementary to "real" ethnography – arguing that it does not require leaving the comfort of one's home to endure the hardships of physical fieldwork – this perspective invites critique. The Internet and social media have become an almost natural extension of our everyday realities, and have become crucial for transnational communities, particularly during crises like the pandemic. To study the life of a community without engaging with its virtual dimension would result in an incomplete picture. The Internet is where important events are mediated and narrated to those in other countries. For transnational communities, in particular, it serves as a space to practice family life and nurture social bonds, especially when physical meetings are not possible. This became even more significant during the global health crisis. In the research I participated in, we observed how Romani – a language invisible in public spaces in Poland and elsewhere – was creatively written and used online to comment, inform, share opinions about ongoing course of events (Szewczyk et al., 2023). The Internet thus proved to be a vital space for practicing transnational family and community life, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Bielenin-Lenczowska's work integrates linguistic anthropology, migration studies, and heritage studies, and thus offers a rich and interdisciplinary perspective. Her decade-long engagement with the community ensures empirical rigor, providing unparalleled depth to her findings. Her respectful collaboration with research participants – whom she describes as partners – underscores the ethical dimensions of her work.

Ultimately, *Koloniści z Rio Claro* transcends its immediate context, offering broader insights into diasporic and multilingual communities. The author's nuanced approach to identity, belonging, and heritage challenges methodological nationalism and highlights the agency of local communities. The ethnography practiced by the author is multisen-

sory, and it not only refers to the data, but also to the personal and bodily experiences of the research field. Addressing broader questions about belonging and transnationalism, it demonstrates how language, culture, and identity intersect in diasporic contexts. This book is a model of multisensory and reflexive ethnography and offers essential insights for scholars in migration studies, sociolinguistics, and cultural heritage.

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Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł jest recenzją książki Karoliny Bielenin-Lenczowskiej *Koloniści z Rio Claro. Społeczno-językowe światy polskich osadników w południowej Brazylii*. Książka została wydana w 2024 roku, nakładem wydawnictwa słowo/obraz terytoria; ISBN: 978-83-8325-092-2.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczno-językowe światy; polska diaspora; dziedzictwo kulturowe; etnografia

Citation

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