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## Anthony Bukoski - An Outpost of Polishness

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## **Anthony Bukoski – An Outpost of Polishness**

### **Introduction**

Having spent a great deal of time in the “Northwoods” of northern Wisconsin, critical discussions of ethnicity or ethnic literature are not what immediately come to mind. Dominated as it is by forest, rivers, and lakes, and stitched together by endless lonely highways, this remote region of the United States strikes the casual visitor as more of a world of nature than a world of humanity. And yet, the short stories of Anthony Bukoski speak of another, perhaps more surprising feature of this region, the Polish community in Superior, Wisconsin<sup>1</sup> and more specifically, its once heavily Polish East End. In his collections of short stories about this community, Bukoski endows his native city and its Polish population with a distinct sense of space and traces its noble endurance, a combination of industriousness and quiet decline, over the last seventy years. By bringing to life this community, Bukoski creates a kind of outpost of Polishness, which, like all beleaguered and far-flung outposts, clings to its central mission while also feeling the increasing weight of its isolation and an awareness of its diminishing numbers on a frontier surrounded by strangers. Isolated both spatially and culturally in the American landscape, Bukoski holds

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<sup>1</sup> Superior is located on Lake Superior, about 460 miles north of Chicago, 150 miles from Minneapolis/St. Paul, and 150 miles from the Canadian border.

on like Zbigniew Herbert's chronicler who, too old to fight, is left with little more than the ruins of a once-vibrant Polish American community but who nevertheless remains at his post and records.

### **An Outpost of Polishness**

All Polish American writers deal with the Polishness of place in one way or another, but few can match the depth and solemnity that Bukoski instills in his short stories. While the characters in Stuart Dybek's short story collections *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980), *The Coast of Chicago* (1990), and *I Sailed With Magellan* (2003) meander through a post-industrial landscape of Chicago in the 1960s, in which Polishness has been splintered and hybridized by the rapid social shifts of post-war America, his work is still set against a backdrop of nearly non-stop Polish emigration to the city that dates back to the 1870s. Similar cases can be made for the Polish backdrops of the fictive worlds of John Guzowski (*Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, 2016), Leslie Pietrzyk (*Pears on a Willow Tree*, 1999), and Susan Strempek Shea (*Hoopi Shoopi Donna*, 1997), to name but a few. In spite of the unique problems each of these worlds exhibit, whether it be the trauma of war and displacement, the challenge of generational change, or the pressures of assimilation, they are all grounded in communities that are broad, dynamic, and renewable. In the case of Bukoski, the challenge is rather different. After all, it is difficult to try to write about a place if it is disappearing. In five collections of stories, *Twelve Below Zero* (1986, 2008), *Children of Strangers* (1993), *Polonaise* (1999), *Time Between Trains* (2003), and *North of the Port* (2008), as well as a new collection of recently reissued stories *Head of the Lakes* (2018), Bukoski chronicles both the living core and the death throes of his dwindling Polish community in Superior. When asked about the importance of place and his decision to focus on the Polish community in Superior in an interview with Michael Longrie in the *Wisconsin Academy Review*, Bukoski drew a direct correlation between Superior's geographical isolation within the United States and the vulnerability of its Polish population.

I've always thought of Superior as a kind of outpost, a geographical outpost because we are so far north, backed up against Lake Superior, the largest fresh-water

lake in the world. We're surrounded by a range of hills in Duluth. The hills grow quite high. The range is thousands of years old and called the Duluth-Gabbro complex. We are stuck, as it were, here in the lowlands, or were at least in my childhood (I was born in 1945) until, say, the late 1950s. Even now we have only a two-lane highway coming up from Spooner almost to Superior, which isolates us. Add to this the oftentimes severe weather, and I'd like to think of us as kind of an outpost.

Isolated this way, I think we're psychologically and emotionally circumscribed. I lived in a largely Polish-American neighborhood. Our church was founded by Polish immigrants --- our church being St. Adalbert's. These were the people I had most commerce with.

(Longrie: 29)<sup>2</sup>

In some ways, his are stories of identity that are several times removed; not only does the Polishness of the world he describes already take them out of the mainstream of American literature but the remoteness of the location, off the grid of popular US transportation routes and tucked in the corner of Lake Superior just below the Canadian border, also ensures that the people and location are all but invisible to the wider world.

It might be possible, as Michael Martone has done in *Townships*, to place his fictional world within the vague confines of Midwestern fiction.<sup>3</sup> Martone, however, admitted the difficulty of using the term "Midwestern" to denote writers like Bukoski, who live in the bordering states of Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan.

It seems to me still that the metaphors linking us together as Midwesterners are few and flimsy. Anyone claiming to have found the common thread of regionalism here also tends to initiate its unraveling. Even the simple argument about the Midwest's location is a telling one. If that question remains unanswered, the

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<sup>2</sup> Longrie and Bukoski both grew up in Superior and became professors of American literature in Wisconsin's state university system. Both men are quite aware of how to locate Superior, literally and figuratively, which lends Bukoski's effort to place Superior an extra degree of intentionality.

<sup>3</sup> See Martone's essay "Correctionville," which serves as the introduction to *Townships*, in which he makes his case for defining writers living in and writing about a large and diverse swath of the American hinterland. He includes both Bukoski and Dybek in this group, in spite of the vast differences between the worlds in which they grew up and later captured in their writing.

one that follows, just what it means to be a Midwesterner, can be avoided. We are left always with the Midwest as lump, as leftover. We are always making the most of it, whatever it is.

(*Townships*: 12)

This “lump” of “leftover” space, sadly, is often the extent of the Midwest’s presence in the American imagination. Unlike Southern literature, which has become a distinct American literary genre of its own, Midwestern writers like Bukoski tend to operate in relative obscurity, more or less noticeable depending on the remoteness of their location and the size of their communities.<sup>4</sup>

The remoteness of Superior, lost as it is even in the shadow of neighboring Duluth and the vacation land of the “Scandinavian Riviera” directly to its north, lends it a physical remove and ethnic anonymity that makes it literally and figuratively hard to reach.<sup>5</sup> The world Bukoski describes, moreover, is similarly removed from the mainstream of Polish America or *Polonia*, both in nature and in space, which is associated with major metropolitan Polish communities like Chicago and New York. If anything, Bukoski’s stories are a reminder of the ways in which the Polish immigrants, as illustrated in Natalie Petesch’s short story collection *The Immigrant Train*, found new homes in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century through a combination of accident, necessity, and opportunity. As many of Petesch’s characters discover, the magnetic pull of Polish communities in Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago make it difficult to understand what would drive many other Polish immigrants to trek hundreds of miles beyond these ethnic centers. Those who do are confronted with question as to why they left this Polish *somewhere* to end up seemingly *nowhere* and with *nobody*.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, this is not how Bukoski imagines Superior or the Polish community that made its home there. The once-vibrant Polish immigrant community in his stories, though, is an ever-shrinking remnant of

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically, prior to getting his MFA from Brown University, Bukoski received his Ph.D. in English with an emphasis on American Literature from the University of Iowa. His first teaching job was at Northwestern State University of Louisiana at Natchitoches.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this world and its Scandinavian heritage, see Anderson and Blanck.

<sup>6</sup> This reference to “nobody” stems from Petesch’s story “The Orphan Train,” in which a Mexican character named María complains to the main Polish American protagonist, Marriek, about the lack of community (Mexican) she perceived in the work camp in Aurora, Minnesota in which they both found themselves.

the original late nineteenth century settlement, bolstered only at odd times by small numbers of migrants fleeing the chaos of WWII or the odd individual fleeing Martial Law in Poland.<sup>7</sup>

### A Chronicler of Presence

As circumstances turn against the Poles in Superior – the bustling churches and factories are closed, the older generation begins to die off, and the younger generation moves away – Bukoski assumes the role of a cultural archeologist of his community. While the nature of the task is different, Bukoski’s position vis-à-vis his community is reminiscent of “the inferior role of chronicler” in Herbert’s landmark poem “A Report from the Besieged City,” in which the assault of isolation and decline has resulted in a situation leaving only “the place an attachment to the place/still we keep ruins of temples phantoms of gardens of houses/ if we were to lose the ruins we would be left with nothing” (Herbert: 76). Intimately familiar with the people and the area, Bukoski’s stories situate the Polish community indefinitely in the topography, hydrology, and geology of Superior. As Bukoski explains in an essay titled “Water Plans,” he carries Superior within him like an inland sea, and he navigates these waters of memory with purpose and an ingrained sense of direction.

I have guarded this coast with my life, it seems. Even when I lived in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, I would remember the ancient water of home that seemed everywhere beneath me. Ship captains know the depths and bottom conditions of the Great Lakes, the topography of shores, the various beacons and antennae upon them. They fear November storms on the Inland Seas... I have my own recommended limits when I venture out, my own navigational guides.

*(Townships: 28)*

For Bukoski, it is not just the place but the people, particularly the Polish people of the even more circumscribed neighborhood of the East End of Superior, who leave their indelible mark on the land, a mark that cannot be entirely effaced even with the razing of the local church, St. Adalbert’s, or the closing

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<sup>7</sup> The Diocese of Superior, Wisconsin has an informative timeline of Polish migration to the state of Wisconsin and, specifically, to Superior. See <https://catholicdos.org/polish-roots>.

of the Polish hall. Like all of ethnic America, there is an internal if at times spectral geography to Superior, a local sense of place that interests Bukoski.<sup>8</sup> Somewhat like Dybek's memories of the Pilsen neighborhood bordering 18th Street on the south side of Chicago, the traces of the Polish community remain here long after the buildings and the people who filled them have been removed. In the story "Pesthouse," from the collection *Polonaise*, Bukoski's narrator recalls her childhood in Superior and the time she spent in an isolation hospital for scarlet fever as a child.

Here is how the neighborhoods were in a childhood long ago. They still are this way, I should think. The Allouez section of Superior, Wisconsin, was Belgian, the north end French and Indian, and the gas plant neighborhood Slovak. Mine was Polish. It will stay Polish forever, nothing but Polish.

(Bukoski, 1999: 1).

Bukoski maps the presence and experience of the Polish community in Superior in a way that evokes the kinds of glacial pressures that are registered on a community and remain long after the vibrancy of the community has begun to fade away. In mapping the beleaguered outpost of the Polish community in Superior, Bukoski presents a community reminiscent of the one in Brian Friel's play *Translations*, in which the characters in the fictive town of Baile Beag (Ballybeg), Ireland find themselves living in "a civilization [...] imprisoned in a [...] contour which no longer matches the landscape of [...] fact" (Friel: 52). Bukoski's characters may not be struggling with the overlapping pressures of colonialism, language, and identity that Friel's characters in 1833 Ireland encounter, but like Friel's fictive village his stories are cultural *immerscapes*, in which the experience and identity of the Polish Americans who once inhabited

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<sup>8</sup> This is all the more apparent when one visits Bukoski in Superior. In touring the city with him, I was treated to the same landmarks of his youth and the former Polish community: the childhood home built and meticulously maintained by his blue-collar parents; the former sites of St. Adalbert's Church and *Szkoła Wojciecha*; the Warsaw Tavern (now under new ownership); the docks and flour mills where his father once worked; the cemetery where his parents are buried; the pervasiveness of iron dust; the high trestle tracks that give views of the vastness of Lake Superior as well as the low dense gorse of the neighboring wetlands; the Left-Handed River; and the current meeting place of the Thaddeus Kościuszko Fraternal Aid Society (colloquially known as the "Polish Club"). This is terrain that Bukoski, who walks six or seven miles a day, traverses with regularity and great purpose.

this neighborhood in Superior are permanently inscribed in the space, long after they and the community they created in its institutional forms are no longer visible. As he explained in a recent interview, “I hope people know that once there was a Polish presence in Superior. I hope they know there is (someday they’ll say ‘there *was*’) a Polish Club here” (Dillon: 4).

### To Chronicle is to Remember

There is a certain ontological sense of purpose to Bukoski’s work, as if by recalling the Polish people of Superior in his stories he is able somehow to maintain, if not claim, their hard-won place on the map of American memory. Although he is not surrounded by a vibrant, living community such as Chicago, continually renewed by wave after wave of new immigrants, or the ever present symbolic reminders of Polish national identity as was Stanisław Wyspiański, one of the creative voices and spiritual forces of the Young Poland movement, Bukoski’s position as a writer straddling both the present and the past calls to mind Wyspiański’s monumental vision in the poem “And I Constantly See Their Faces,” in which the living and the dead, the past and the present, coexist in a shared space and as one community.

In thunder and wind they go wild  
And in thunder and wind they die out –  
In darkness fainter and quieter –  
Already, already they are barely visible –  
Once again they arise – returning monumental,  
Huge, living – conscious.

(Wyspiański)

Whereas Wyspiański, for better or worse, was constantly reminded of and could make a direction connection to Poland’s distant past, for Bukoski this connection between the community of the living and the dead in the East End of Superior assumes the role of critical responsibility, to capture this once-thriving community. Largely cut off from Poland and marginalized in the vast ethnic landscape of the United States, there is a sense of determination that Bukoski shares with fellow Polish American writers such as Guzłowski.



Bukoski, in fact, quotes Guzowski's essay "Growing Up Polack," which was both published on-line on his blog ([lightning-and-ashes.blogspot.com](http://lightning-and-ashes.blogspot.com)) and in the Chicago-based Polish daily newspaper *Dziennik Zwiazkowy*.

Even if people don't want to read what I write, I feel that I have to write my poems about my parents just to make sure someone does. Really, there just aren't a lot of people writing about people like my parents and the other DPs. And if I don't write, who will? Imagine all of those hundreds of thousands of Poles who came to this country as DPs. Who wrote for them? They couldn't write for themselves. I sometimes feel that I am writing for all those people whose stories were never told, whose voices got lost somewhere in the great cemetery of the 20th century, and I have an obligation to listen to those voices and give them a place to be heard.

(Guzowski)

Although these two communities and the worlds in which they lived, the East End of Superior and Humboldt Park in Chicago, could not be more different, Bukoski clearly shares an affinity for Guzowski's sense of responsibility to write about the people he knew who did not, or could not, write for themselves. Far removed from the cataclysm of WWII, Bukoski nonetheless captures a similar struggle to give voice to his community as it continually loses its place over the course of the twentieth century.

Added to this is Bukoski's sensibility as a Midwestern writer of the working class, for he perceives a distinct sense of nobility and worth in the decline and decay of the blue collar neighborhood he writes about that is intimately linked to its position as a disregarded outpost on the ethnic map of America. "For a few years now," Bukoski reflected in his interview with Longrie, "I've thought this locale, this neighborhood, we're as worthy of treatment of fiction as is Paris or Madrid or any other location. I think we're no less noble and no less cursed with our humanity than anybody else" (Longrie: 30). Both James Joyce and Czesław Miłosz used similar language to correct what they perceived to be the prevailing and unjust sense of Irish and Polish invisibility by insisting on their place at the literary table and a sense of the naturalness of their belonging on the cultural map of the world. Joyce, for his part, observed in a 1905 letter to his brother, Stanislaus, "when you remember that Dublin has been a capital for thousands of years, that it is the 'second' city of the British Empire, that it is nearly three times as big as Venice, it seems strange that no artist has given

it to the world” (Attridge: 260). Separated by a world of experience, Miłosz complained in similar fashion decades later in *Native Realm*:

I see an injustice. A Parisian does not have to bring his city out of nothingness every time he wants to describe it. A wealth of allusions lie at his disposal, for his city exists in works of word, brush, and chisel; even if it were to vanish from the face of the earth, one would still be able to recreate it in the imagination. But I, returning in thought to the streets where the most important part of my life unfolded, am obliged to invent the most utilitarian sort of symbols and am forced to condense my material, as is usual when everything, from geography and architecture to the color of the air, has to be squeezed into a few sentences.

(Miłosz: 54)

The language that Bukoski uses to characterize his outlook on his native city, which cannot claim to rival that of Dublin or Vilnius, describes a position that is not unique to him or the Polish community of Superior, but is the natural domain of all writers whose work plumbs the experience of the minority, the marginal, and the peripheral.

More than merely calling for the Polish community in Superior to be put on the map, figuratively speaking, for Bukoski it is this sense of the nobility of place and the people who live there, the recognition of the unique position of this small community living on the periphery of the American experience that matters. In “A Concert of Minor Pieces,” also from *Polonaise*, Leo Polaski in his retirement tends the cemetery at St. Adalbert’s, which has since been torn down, and reminisces about a vibrant Polish community that is no longer what it once was.

He thought of St. Adalbert’s Church, and the school near the river – of their roofs, of their old brick walls. Overgrown fields now grew where the church stood. His niece Stanislawa (Stella) had once held a recital in the St. Adalbert’s School across from the church. She’d worn a white dress with a red sash, the colors of Poland, and spoken very plainly in the gymnasium. She’d said, “This is to be a concert of minor pieces. Mostly Chopin.” How can it be so many years now? thought Mr. Polaski. Nothing is where it should be anymore.

(Bukoski, 1999: 176)

In spite of this loss, which is a symbolic reminder of the decline of the Polish community in the East End, Bukoski affords it no less dignity than that

of sanctified space. After retracing the outlines of the foundation of St. Adalbert's in the snow, "where the altar sanctuary had been, the communion railing, the shrine to the Black Madonna of Czestochowa," Mr. Polaski kneels where St. Adalbert's statue had once stood and prays for the people he had known in the community, the priests and the nuns, all of whom were now gone.

From as far away as Chicago, Mr. Polaski heard voices echoing prayer, echoes from the Old Country. "Awake," they said to him. Then Mr. Polaski prayed the way he used to and said he was grateful for his life. "*Boże, w obliczu którego żadna.*" Then the ground was cold, and he saw everyone he'd ever known in the neighborhood – but from a distance.

(Bukoski, 1999: 179–180)

Although the Bishop has deconsecrated the ground upon which the church once stood, for Mr. Polaski, as well as for Bukoski, this remains sacred ground because it was and will always be a *Polish* space. The passing away of the once vibrant community and the older generation lends Bukoski's East End a quality that is equal parts noble presence and spectral absence.<sup>9</sup> The memory of this community persists, just as it does in Polish American communities all across the United States, with or without the people who created it.

The dilemma of wanting what you cannot have informs the strong aesthetics of place in Bukoski's stories about the Polish community in Superior. Bukoski's protagonists are much like the once bustling town he so loves – they are the sadsack ballplayers who missed their chance at happiness, the retired mill workers who struggle to breathe and are helpless as the town they helped build decays in front of their eyes, or the war-addled Vietnam veterans whose inability to cope with reality coincides with the fractured nature of their community. Bukoski has an abiding affection for these characters for they are his people. To a certain extent, these characters embody the decline and marginalization of Superior, registered first and foremost in the experience of the Polish community. For Bukoski, their loss is his loss, and yet in the foundations of the razed churches and the map of community memory, Bukoski, and his characters, can find meaning and purpose. In "A Geography of Snow," Tad,

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<sup>9</sup> This calls to mind yet another connection with Joyce, who argued with his friends that, "death is the most beautiful form of life by saying that absence the greatest form of presence." See Ellmann: 262.

the narrator's battle-shocked cousin, obsesses over a map of Superior, which he plans to take with him on his second tour of duty as a marine in Vietnam. Evidently disturbed by his war experience, Tad's desire to "educate the Viet Cong" about Superior, Wisconsin speaks to Bukoski's love of his native town.

As Thaddeus bends to kiss another area of the map, I figure that, according to the contour lines, the land above the river must drop thirty feet as it nears the bay. All of this is marked on the map. Sometimes, in real life, the Left-Handed River reverses course. Instead of entering the bay from the south, the way it normally does, the river appears as if it's running back to where it came from. This happens when northwest winds create white-caps on the lake. "If I kiss the place," Tad's saying, "then I'm okay. But how do you kiss a neighborhood? I've never done anything brave. At least lemme study this map a little and get some strength".

(Bukoski, 2003: 12)

The question of how one can "kiss a neighborhood" or embrace what is fleeting, vanishing before your eyes – the people, the institutions, the bustle, and the language – hangs over many of the characters in Bukoski's stories. The question seems to be an intuitive one, the kind of fervent nostalgia people commonly feel for the streets and alleyways of their memories. Bukoski situates himself amidst the humble, blue-collar people of Superior, but he does so as an act of creative empathy and solidarity that leaves little distance between the narrator and the author. When Augie Wyzinski, a one-time major league baseball prospect, washes out of the minor leagues in Louisiana and ends up back in the East End tending bar at the Heartbreak Hotel in the story "The Tools of Ignorance," one gets the sense that for Bukoski there is a certain degree of self-identification at work. Unable to stick it out in baseball, Augie appears to sabotage his own career as he is drawn inexorably home to his native climate, his native people, his native Superior.

"You go home!"

"I can't. What would I do? Sit with my ma? Say the rosary with her? Anyway, if I looked in the mirror at home, I'd just see you guys. I might as well stay here where I got you in front of me. Go on, tell me I'm lousy. I got all night to listen to you guys with high self-esteem".

(Bukoski, 1999: 86)

Bukoski, like his characters, still dwells, metaphorically speaking, in the neighborhood of his childhood, and in spite of its decline is able to recall the lay of the land and the people who once gave it life.

The fundamental question for Bukoski, then, is to what purpose all of this is being done. What does it mean to honor and remember something that, as a rule, is opaque to the consciousness of most Americans? This dilemma is best felt in the title story of the collection *Children of Strangers*, which encapsulates for Bukoski the bittersweet nature of the waning Polish American presence in Superior. The story chronicles an elderly couple on their way to a social function at the local school, Szkoła Wojciecha, to honor the retirement of the oldest and last remaining of the Polish nuns in the parish, Sister Bronisław. The Sister's career as spiritual guide, teacher, and cultural institution parallels the history of the local Polish community, and her decline is their decline. "The trainer of wayward Polish youth," Josephine Slipkowski reflects, "instructed them – she trained us, me, thinks Josie – to work, to honor the Polish flag, to grow up in the faith. Now the neighborhood's gone to hell with people of different faith, or of no faith" (Bukoski, 1993: 83). Josephine worries that her children will not have the strength and the faith that the Sisters and the older generation people *from the Old Country* did to maintain tradition. "What the old ones have," Josephine decides, "is faith that has traveled far" (85). Tellingly, when the members of the class of '34 sing "Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła" and "Joining Poland's Sons and Daughters, We'll be Poles Forever," they are interrupted by two young boys, or "invaders," who "witness for the first time their neighbors' nobility," but ultimately disregard and look through it (88). Far from being xenophobic or ethnocentric, Bukoski's focus on this community allows for a range of cross cultural connections, whether it is between Poles and Native Americans in "The River of the Flowering Banks" (*Children of Strangers*), Polish Catholics and Polish Jews in "Time Between Trains" (*Time Between Trains*), or between the Poles and members of the other "too-often forgotten people, Swedes and Finns [...] I think that the people here are as noble or ignoble, as venal and humorous and tragic as any Muscovite or Parisian. Our norther corner of the state deserves a voice in literature" (Friedrich: 17). In spite of the determination on the part of the older generation of Poles in Superior always to remain Poles, there is the very real problem of maintaining this outpost of Polishness with

a dwindling population of committed “defenders” and no younger generation to replace them. Bukoski’s stories fall within this gap, serving to remember the place and the Polish community of Superior despite or because of the cultural and economic forces that ultimately serve to replace or erase this presence.

Throughout Bukoski’s stories the decline and loss of key figures such as Sister Bronisław in “Children of Strangers” or Father Nowak in “The Case for Bread and Sausage” in *North of the Port* is felt as a real form of irreplaceable, symbolic loss for the younger generation. “I know,” reflects the narrator in “The Case for Bread and Sausage,” “how Jesus went forty days and nights in the wilderness without food and how Father Nowak went forty years at St. Adalbert’s Church giving everything he had to others [...] That he didn’t finish his work around the parish – this is maybe why he cries so hard on the porch” (Bukoski, 2008: 59). By skipping back and forth in time, from the period of his youth in the 1950s to the socially turbulent times of the 1970s, in which Bukoski and America struggled with the experience of Vietnam, Bukoski captures the way in which the younger generation both witnesses this decline and struggles to assume the mantle held by their elders to preserve and defend this community, with varying results. While for some characters, such as Pete Dziedzic in “Report of the Guardian of the Sick,” the divide between the older and younger generation represents a wound that will never heal, for others, like the two boys who serve as Father Nowak’s altar boys in “The Case for Bread and Sausage,” there is the distinct possibility that through the example of the older generation they will grow up to be good men, having been transformed, in the language of Słowacki, from being simple “bread eaters” into “angels” (Bukoski, 2008: 60). Interestingly enough, Dybek cites this same fragment from Słowacki’s poem “My Testament” as the epigraph for his collection *The Coast of Chicago* and to somewhat similar ends. Bukoski, for his part, has taken up the role of characters such as Sister Bronisław, Father Nowak, and Al Dziedzic, who were committed to preserving this outpost of Polishness in Superior. At the same time, he recognizes the challenge of maintaining such a presence over time and the various ways in which private memory can often go unnoticed even in a community as cohesive and traditional as that of the East End. Bukoski inscribes the precariousness of this position in the city of Superior itself, isolated as it is by distance, decline, and weather. “By late January,” Catherine,

the narrator in the title story “North of the Port” observes, “when no ships sail, towns lie idle, frozen. As though suspended in ice, lives like my Grandfather’s become meaningless” (Bukoski, 2008: 143–144).

‘In his stories about the Polish community of Superior, which is alternately isolated, frozen, and eviscerated, Bukoski increasingly finds himself alone as the lone voice of this outpost of Polishness. This is the natural predicament of all such outposts, Herbert observes, for “those marked by misfortune are always alone,” and yet, in recalling the people, their struggles and their stories, the chronicler of the outpost is able to transcend what constrains and diminishes it and, in doing so, preserve it in the imagination.

cemeteries grow larger the number of defenders shrinks  
but the defense continues and will last to the end  
and even if the City falls and one of us survives  
he will carry the City inside him on the roads of exile  
he will be the City

(Herbert: 77)

Herbert and Bukoski may be working on two entirely different planes of Polishness, but they converge in respect to the way that writing can respond to the challenge of preserving what came before, the language and traditions of a people, in the face of outside pressures that work, deliberately or unconsciously, to efface them completely. By reading his stories, Bukoski preserves the struggle of this outpost of Polishness and, in doing so, places it on the literary map of American literature, allowing us to join in its defense and to participate in its survival.

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## Anthony Bukoski – An Outpost of Polishness

### Summary

Isolated both geographically and psychologically, the Polish American writer Anthony Bukoski in his five collections of stories, *Twelve Below Zero* (1986, 2008), *Children of Strangers* (1993), *Polonaise* (1999), *Time Between Trains* (2003), and *North of the Port* (2008), as well as a collection of reissued stories *Head of the Lakes* (2018), assumes a variety of interrelated roles – chronicler, cultural archeologist, coastal guardsman, and spokesman – for the dwindling Polish community in his hometown of Superior, Wisconsin. Bukoski's stories capture the distinct relationship between people and place in Superior, situated as it is the periphery of American life in northern Wisconsin. His stories shed light on the struggle to preserve a sense of Polishness, of community, in the face of isolation in the ethnically indistinct landscape of the Upper Midwest while living in a blue collar community that is aging and diminishing over time. Bukoski not only advocates for the right for this community to receive literary treatment, but he also takes on the many-faceted role of chronicler in attempting to preserve its struggles, enduring emotional markers, and memory. By defending and preserving, remembering and traversing, Bukoski creates an outpost of Polishness that captures a uniquely Polish space in the vast wilderness of the American cultural landscape. While his stories present a world that is vanishing before his eyes, he makes a case for its permanent inclusion on the American cultural and literary map.

**Keywords:** comparative literature, Anthony Bukoski, American Literature, Polish American Literature, Polonia, regionalism, ethnicity, cultural memory

**Słowa kluczowe:** komparatystyka literacka, Anthony Bukoski, literatura amerykańska, literatura polsko-amerykańska, Polonia, regionalizm, narodowość, pamięć kulturowa