

## **Sweet Home Chicago? The Windy City and American Writers of Polish Descent**

The project will offer the first comprehensive analysis of the literary representations of Chicago in texts by contemporary American authors of Polish descent. Even though the role of Chicago as a primary destination for Polish immigrants to the US has been studied by historians and sociologists, a parallel study by a literary scholar has not yet been attempted.

The project aspires to fill this gap by probing whether the role of Chicago as a capital of sorts of American Polonia has found its reflection in literary texts. My intention is to discuss selected texts by contemporary American writers based in or otherwise closely connected with the city of Chicago who have been selected on the basis of their Polish roots and their writing in English for the mainstream American reading public. Thus, the project excludes mainstream American writers writing about Poles but having no connections to Poland whatsoever – such as the notorious Nelson Algren – or Polish immigrants writing exclusively in Polish. The list of writers to be studied in this project includes to date Stuart Dybek, John Guzlowski, Douglas Bukowski, and Elizabeth Kern, but may possibly be extended during the project. Although the selected writers represent various genres (Dybek – short story and poetry, Guzlowski – autobiographical poetry and detective fiction, Bukowski – memoir, Kern – historical fiction), what brings them together is their shared interest in the Polish Chicago. As they make it clear in interviews, their literary preoccupation with Chicago is deeply rooted in their own life experiences. Since they have all been raised by immigrant or second-generation Polish American parents in various parts of the city populated by Poles (Dybek – Pilsen/Little Village, Guzlowski – Humboldt Park, Bukowski – Bridgeport, Kern – Polish Downtown/Polish Triangle) and use these areas as the setting for their works, the proposed project will succeed in offering a generationally and geographically comprehensive picture of the Polish experience and presence in Chicago as narrated in literary texts, accounting for the majority of traditional Polish settlements in the Windy City.

Similar research questions will be posed with reference to each of these writers and their texts: What is the dominant image and role of Chicago in a given text? How are its depictions tied to the notion of home, which seems to lie close to the heart of writers whose family histories have complicated the nature and meaning of the word “home”? How do the differences in terms of literary genre and the writer’s/protagonist’s gender affect the image of the city dominant in a given text? Do these texts seem to engage in a dialog with mainstream depictions of Chicago’s Poles? Do they present Poles in interaction with other ethnic minorities? Notably, the vast majority of the texts to be analyzed in this project, including the most recent ones penned already in the second decade of the twenty-first century, focus on the Chicago of the past, with the 1950s and 1960s seeming the most frequent temporal setting. Can this body of texts be read as a tribute to the communities and locations that are already gone? Such a reading seems intuitive in light of the demographic changes of the last several decades, with Poles relocating in substantial numbers from the traditional Polish settlements to Chicago’s suburban areas, leading perhaps to the Windy City’s corresponding loss of its status as the capital of Polonia.

The findings of the research project will be presented at conferences in the US, in articles submitted to international journals, and ultimately in a book form. I intend to submit the manuscript to one of prestigious university presses in the USA that release book series thematically related to this project, most likely the Polish and Polish American Studies Series of the University of Ohio Press or the Chicago Visions and Revisions Series of the University of Chicago Press.