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"The city of their fathers": Urban Space, Memory, and Language in Stuart Dybek's Short Fiction

ABSTRACT

Stuart Dybek is a writer invariably associated with his neighborhood of Pilsen/Little Village on Chicago's Lower West Side. Having grown up there as a descendant of immigrants from Poland, Dybek frequently "revisits" his old neighborhood in his writing. His texts showcase the changes of the urban space, narrated through references to the material, social, cultural, and linguistic environment. In this essay, I will analyze two of Dybek's texts—the sequence "Hot Ice" from his second collection of stories *The Coast of Chicago* and the story "Qué Quieres" from *I Sailed with Magellan*—to probe the palimpsestic construction of urban space, whereby the past, present, and future of urban orders are narrated simultaneously. Both texts illustrate ethnic succession in the neighborhood—from Slavs to Hispanics—which finds its reflection in the linguistic layer of the stories and construes translation as an inevitable element of urban experience.

Keywords: Stuart Dybek, Chicago, literature of neighborhood, memory, multilingual city.

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When in 2023 the Harold Washington Library in Downtown Chicago celebrated the 150th anniversary of the city's public library system, the magnificent building's seventh floor—with holdings of literary texts, mostly—had a small exhibition commemorating the Windy City's most recognized writers. One of them was Stuart Dybek,[1] featured alongside Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sandra Cisneros, and Lorraine Hansberry. What is noteworthy about these authors is that in their texts they tend to focus on a particular area of the city, which, after all, is known for its seventy-seven distinct neighborhoods.[2] Dybek is not an exception to this rule: born in 1942 to a Polish-American family in Pilsen on Chicago's Lower West Side and raised in the nearby Little Village, in his poetry and prose he frequently returns to these neighborhoods that can be claimed to constitute a creative kernel of his work. His writing has been discussed in the context of the "literature of neighborhood," a category defined as "a subset of . . . urban literature," specifically to account for the distinct flavor of Chicago's neighborhoods that would be obfuscated by the discussion of their literary representations in more general terms as simply urban narratives (Rotella, "The Literature of Neighborhood" 57). Given the social realist traits of Dybek's works, the writer can be considered a successor of Nelson Algren, whose *Man with the Golden Arm* in particular earned the author a reputation as a chronicler of the working-class neighborhood back in the 1940s. Like Dybek, Algren found his literary niche in depicting the life of the Polish neighborhood, in his case the so-called Polish Downtown in Chicago's Wicker Park. But while Algren was considered an outsider to the community and criticized for painting an unflattering picture of it—given the profusion of Polish drunks, drug addicts, and criminals in his oeuvre—Dybek as a descendant of Polish immigrants to Chicago was privy to the first-hand experience of what it means to be a Polish American. The latter's interest in Pilsen/Little Village may in turn be understood as antecedent to Sandra Cisneros's work. Cisneros may have set her celebrated *The House on Mango Street* on a fictitious street in Chicago, but her coming-of-age novel portrays life in a Mexican-American barrio in a very realistic manner. In a way, her text may be read as a depiction of the neighborhood in the wake of the Slavs' departure from it, while in Dybek's narratives the Slavs and the Hispanics still live side by side. Interestingly, Dybek never presents the city as static; on the contrary, he narrates the rapid

[1] Dybek's position within American letters was underscored by the *New York Times* reviewer of his last two volumes of short fiction—*Ecstatic Cahoots: Fifty Short Stories* and *Paper Lantern: Love Stories*, released simultaneously in 2014—who hailed Dybek as "not only our [US-American] most relevant writer, but maybe our best" (Strauss).

[2] See https://www.choosechicago.com/neighborhoods/

transformations of the urban space encompassing both built and human environments. As I will argue in this essay, many of the changes to which the urban order is subject are coded through language, which serves to reflect the alterations of the neighborhood's material, cultural, and social structures.[3]

A text that perhaps best exemplifies Dybek's rendition of urban space is the sequence of stories titled "Hot Ice," included in his second collection *The Coast of Chicago* (1990) and comprised of sections titled "Saints," "Amnesia," "Grief," "Nostalgia," and "Legends." Similarly to Dybek's well-known story "Blight," "Hot Ice" features a group of young men of different ethnicities who come of age in Pilsen/Little Village. The central consciousness in the story is the Polish American Eddie Kapusta, befriended by two Mexican American brothers, Manny and Pancho Santora. The introductory piece, "Saints," reiterates a pattern present in many of Dybek's texts, whereby the young protagonists share memories and stories of what the neighborhood used to be like. In this particular instance, the story precedes their birth and is a tale of a grieving Bohemian father, who freezes the body of his young daughter in his icehouse after she drowns in the Douglas Park lagoon. According to the rumors still circulating in the neighborhood, the father gathered the body of his daughter in his arms and stopped a passing streetcar to be taken directly to the icehouse. The reference to Douglas Park immediately prompts a reflection on the changes to the racial/ethnic composition of the neighborhood: "Douglas Park was a black park now, the lagoon curdled in milky green scum as if it had soured, and Kapusta didn't doubt that were he to go there they'd find his body floating in the lily pads too" (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 123). While part of the previously Slavic neighborhood is now Black and off limits to white ethnics—a change clearly presented in negative terms as evidenced by the diction of the excerpt quoted above[4]—there is still considerable intermingling of Slavs and Hispanics in the protagonist's neighborhood, as illustrated by Eddie's friendship with the Santora brothers.

To fully understand Dybek's depiction of the neighborhood, some historical facts are necessary. Pilsen dates back to the 1860s, "when Irish and Germans first settled there" (Mora-Torres 5). By the early 20th century, the area was populated mostly by Bohemian and Polish immigrants, who

[3] This distinction is indebted to Hana Wirth-Nesher's study *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, in which the author offers a certain typology of urban space, dividing it into the natural, built, human, and verbal environment (11–13).

[4] For a discussion of the reasons for Poles' animosity towards Blacks on the grounds of job competition and strikebreaking, as well as conflict over housing and urban space, see Radzilowski and Gunkel (161–64).

were drawn there by industries demanding unskilled labor, such as "lumber mills, garment finishing sweatshops, and railroad yard jobs" (Gellman 608). The name Pilsen is in itself a testimony to the Slavic history of the area, as it originated with the establishment of a restaurant called "At the City of Plzen" by one Bohemian resident (608), Plzen being a major Czech city. By the 1950s and 1960s, Eastern European immigrants and their descendants were being pushed away from the neighborhood by Mexican Americans, especially after the latter's relocation from the Near West Side, cleared to expand the University of Chicago campus (608). The nearby neighborhood of Little Village has a similar ethnic and social class composition, resulting in its being called "the Mexican capital of the Midwest."[5] The coexistence of various ethnicities in the neighborhood could of course be antagonistic at times. Gladsky argues that the "commingling of Latino and Slav is economic and sociological more than cultural—a product of shifting urban people and resulting neighborhood changes, the result of shared environment and social class" ("Mr. Dybek's Neighborhood" 134). As my subsequent analysis will show, "Hot Ice" and "Qué Quieres" present two very different pictures of the forced coexistence of Slavs and Hispanics within the same urban space, yet both depictions will emphasize the necessity of translation in this ethnically diverse neighborhood.

Carlo Rotella writes that "Dybek . . . has drawn upon late-twentieth-century Chicago to create a layered, dreamlike city of feeling in which his characters confront haunting survivals of the old city as well as casually surrealistic harbingers of the new" ("Literary Images of Chicago" 488). Dybek's rendition of the layers of urban orders—arranged for the most part chronologically—is particularly noticeable in the description that opens the second text in the "Hot Ice" sequence, aptly titled "Amnesia." The excerpt needs to be quoted at length to highlight the succession and overlap of urban layers in Dybek's prose:

> It was hard to believe there ever were streetcars. The city back then, *the city of their fathers*, which was *as far back as a family memory extended*, even the city of their childhoods, seemed as remote to Eddie and Manny as the capital of some foreign country.
>
> The past collapsed about them—*decayed, bulldozed, obliterated*. They walked past block-length gutted factories, past walls of peeling, multicolored doors hammered up around flooded excavation pits, hung out in half-boarded storefronts of groceries that had shut down when they were kids, dusty cans still stacked on the shelves. . . .

[5] See https://www.choosechicago.com/neighborhoods/little-village/

> They could vaguely remember something different *before the cranes and wrecking balls gradually moved in*, not order exactly, but rhythms: five-o'clock whistles, air-raid sirens on Tuesdays, Thursdays when the stockyards blew over like a brown wind of boiling hooves and bone . . .
>
> *Things were gone they couldn't remember but missed*; and things were gone they weren't sure ever were there—the pickle factory by the railroad tracks where a DP with a net worked scooping rats out of the open vats, troughs for ragmen's horses, ragmen and their wooden wagons, knife sharpeners pushing screeching whetstones up alleys hollering "Scissors! Knives!", hermits living in cardboard shacks behind billboards.
>
> At times, walking past the gaps, they felt as if they were no longer quite there themselves, half-lost despite familiar street signs, *shadows of themselves superimposed on the present*, except there was no present—everything either rubbled past or promised future—and they were walking as if floating, getting nowhere as if they'd smoked too much grass. (130–31, emphases mine)

Eddie and Manny's present is marked by the enactment of renewal policies envisioned by urban planners in many post-WWII US cities, including Chicago. Historian Dominic Pacyga writes in *Chicago: A Biography* that "[i]n April 1961, [Mayor Richard J.] Daley unveiled a new five-year capital improvement plan that would cost $2.1 billion and included public housing, expressways, bridges, viaducts, street improvement, sewers, and other projects" (347). Ostensibly put forward to improve the conditions of life in inner-city areas, as a matter of fact the policies often disregarded the needs of local communities, leading "to massive displacements of minority residents and the destruction of historic neighborhoods" (Fisher 188). Dybek's text is an apt illustration of that claim, making it clear that as "the cranes and wrecking balls gradually moved in," "the past collapsed about them—decayed, bulldozed, obliterated" (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 130–31).[6]

Dybek's city is not one in which processes of change neatly follow one another. On the contrary, due to his writing technique, based on sequences of memories and associations, the city unfolds simultaneously in the past, present, and future, the three planes as if superimposed on one another. As Rotella puts it,

> Dybek's characters move through a neighborhood that presents them with "apparitions in broad daylight" of an older city: horse-and-wagon peddlers, bridges and trestles encased in decades of pigeon droppings,

[6] For another depiction of the policies of urban renewal, see Dybek's short story "Blight" from the same collection *The Coast of Chicago*.

> defunct factories and icehouses, and other buildings of increasingly mysterious function, aging relatives from the Old Country imbued with semi-fabulous attributes. But the neighborhood also confronts them with newcomers, new ways of doing things, disorientingly new notions of beauty and efficacy and purpose. ("Stuart Dybek and the New Chicago's Literature of Neighborhood" 405)

Dybek's young characters are frequently *flâneurs* whose walks take them through the least glamorous parts of the city: they roam the postindustrial wastelands filled with abandoned factories, junk cars deserted on side streets, heaps of garbage, and the like. In Grażyna Kozaczka's words, "Dybek's neighborhood spaces are not sanitized as he devotes little time to city spaces which denote economic power and control, but rather elevates the marginal as he recreates the abandoned and wasted environments" ("The Neighborhood of Memory" 53). It is this postindustrial wasteland that provides the budding artists in Dybek's fiction with inspiration and creative material. The juxtaposition between the blight of the present moment and their blithe future artistic undertakings—to use the contrast at the heart of short story "Blight"—is further complicated by the previous order, one to which Dybek's characters have no direct access, except through family lore: "as far back as a family memory extended" (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 130). Remembering—or imagining—neighborhood figures of the distant past, such as peddlers, knife sharpeners, ragmen, etc., Dybek's characters arguably exercise postmemory, which Marianne Hirsch defines as "a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment or creation" (662).[7] In a magical realist fashion commented upon by several scholars,[8] Dybek populates Pilsen/Little Village with almost fantastical figures; nevertheless, his depictions of the Chicago of the past are never far removed from reality—as indicated, for example, by the reference, in the excerpt cited above, to the meatpacking industry in the nearby Chicago Union Stockyards.

Moreover, the neighborhood is still home to the older generations who have never adjusted to the US-American way of life and have a tendency to cling to their native traditions and languages. When, towards the end of

[7] Even though Hirsch developed her theory to account for the experiences of children of Holocaust survivors, she concedes that "it may usefully describe the second-generation memory of other cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences" (662).

[8] Cf. Rotella "Stuart Dybek and the New Chicago's Literature of Neighborhood" (405); Kozaczka "Writing Poland and America" (71). In an earlier essay, Rotella labels Dybek a "postindustrial magic realist" ("As If to Say "Jeez!"" 2), and in *October Cities* he posits that "Dybek's true literary godparents might be the Latin American magical realists" (112).

the sequence, Eddie and Manny ramble around the neighborhood—high and drunk—they realize all of a sudden that it is Good Friday, and, without consciously intending to do so, they fall back into their childhood routine of visiting all of the neighborhood churches: "from St. Roman's to St. Michael's, a little wooden Franciscan church in an Italian neighborhood; and from there to St. Casimir's, a towering, mournful church with twin copper-green towers. Then, as if following an invisible trail, they walked north up Twenty-second toward St. Anne's, St. Puis's [sic], St. Adalbert's" (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 152–53).[9] Already in the first church, Eddie notices "[o]ld ladies, [who] ignoring the new liturgy, chanted a litany in Polish" (152). In the last one, the image of "[o]ld women . . . walking on their knees up the marble aisle to kiss the relics" prompts Eddie's reflection that "[m]ost everything from that world had changed or disappeared, but the old women had endured—Polish, Bohemian, Spanish, he knew it didn't matter; they were the same, dressed in black coats and babushkas the way holy statues wore violet, in constant mourning" (154).

The image of old Slavic and Hispanic women sharing the space of the church finds its parallel in the friendship between Eddie Kapusta and the Santora brothers, the bond that is accentuated by the language that the characters use. Although these young men are descendants of immigrants and speak English among themselves, occasionally they resort to the language of their ancestors. For instance, when Eddie and Manny walk along the walls of the prison in the hope that Pancho—incarcerated for drug dealing—will hear them, Manny spontaneously sings a song in Spanish, with Eddie joining in. On their walks, Manny also shares with Eddie a memory of his uncle, who took him fishing on Lake Michigan and spoke Spanish to the fish, "too stubborn to learn English" (149). When Eddie, in turn, thinks of the Spanish word for a pigeon—"*juilota*, which was what Manny called pigeons when they used to hunt them with slingshots under the railroad bridges"—Eddie concludes that it is "a perfect word, . . . one in which he could hear both their cooing and the whistling rush of their wings" (136). Eddie wishes he could reciprocate with a Polish word, but his knowledge is not sufficient: Polish is a language "which his grandma had spoken to him when he was little, and which, Eddie had been told, he could once speak too" (136). Interestingly, Dybek does know the Polish word for pigeon: after all, one of the minor characters in his first collection of stories *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980), a man who "[r]aises pigeons," is called "Pan Gowumpe—'Mr Pidgin' in English" (30), the name approximating the phonetic rendition of the Polish word *gołąb*.

[9] For an analysis of the significance of Catholicism for the American Polonia, see William J. Galush "Polish Americans and Religion" and "Religious Life."

Dybek's decision not to include the Polish word in Eddie's recollections may be a testimony to the increasing dominance of Spanish in the neighborhood or, simply, an illustration of a lack of equivalence between the three languages, whereby the Spanish word seems the most accurate to render Eddie's childhood memories. Clearly, however, for both young men, Spanish and Polish respectively are languages of emotion, intimacy, and immigrant family history, aspects that are not easily translated into English. Eddie and Manny's distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds notwithstanding, what seems to matter most to these two men's bond is their shared experience of coming of age in the same poor, ethnic, working-class neighborhood:

> Manny could be talking Spanish; I could be talking Polish, Eddie thought. It didn't matter. What meant something was sitting at the table together, wrecked together, still awake watching the rainy light spatter the window, walking out again, to the Prague bakery for bismarcs, past people under dripping umbrellas on their way to church. (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 151)

As Sherry Simon posits in the introduction to the study *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory*, "the audible surface of languages, each city's signature blend of dialects and accents, is an equally crucial element of urban reality" (1). In the case of Chicago, it can be argued that each neighborhood has its idiosyncratic mix of heard languages. Simon continues that "[d]espite the sensory evidence of multilingualism in today's cities, the proliferation of scripts on storefronts,[10] the shouted conversations on cellphones, there has been little more than casual reference to language as *a vehicle of urban cultural memory*, or of translation as a key in the creation of meaningful spaces of contact and civic participation" (7, emphasis mine). Dybek's fiction undoubtedly showcases language as "a vehicle of urban cultural memory." While in "Hot Ice" the changes within the neighborhood are narrated mostly through references to the built environment—from streetcars and factories in "the city of their fathers" to the planned tearing down of the legendary icehouse, with the body of the girl presumably still frozen inside—in "Qué Quieres" it is the linguistic layer of the city that changes significantly while the material structures remain, for the most part, intact.

The question "*qué quieres*," Spanish for "what do you want," recurs several times in the story; young Mexican American men direct it at the

[10] This brings to mind an excerpt from Dybek's short story "Orchids" included in *I Sailed with Magellan*: "The street names were in English, but the rest of Twenty-sixth [street] read like a Spanish lesson: *Frutería*, *Lavadero*, *Se Habla Español*" (212).

narrator's brother Mick, who—prompted by nostalgia—decides to visit his old neighborhood. The beginning of the story sketches the context for the Polish/Mexican encounter: "My brother, Mick, crossing the country on a Greyhound Ameripass, has stopped in Chicago and stands before the old apartment building on Washtenaw where we grew up" (Dybek, *I Sailed with Magellan* 247).[11] Mick is on the way to see his ailing father in Memphis and spontaneously decides to "'visit other shrines of memory'—his phrase, irony intended" (248). One of the shrines turns out to be of a culinary character: Mick visits his father's favorite butcher shop in their old neighborhood in Chicago to buy Polish sausage—"a kielbasa" (249)—as a gift for his father.[12] Brandishing the sausage as if it were a weapon, Mick visits the family's old home on Washtenaw in Little Village. The encounter with Mexican American kids, "five *chicos*—teenagers wearing gang colors" (247), is far from amicable. Mick tries to explain in Spanish that he used to live in the building and would like to see the backyard, where he and his brother, the story's narrator, would spend time and hide items unacceptable at home: "cigarettes and lighters, pints of muscatel the winos bought for us, dirty playing cards, illegal fireworks" (272). It is clear that Mick, whose rented apartment in New York City has recently burned down, is practically homeless and in search of a sense of belonging; however, as the story demonstrates, he is unlikely to find a sense of home in the family's old neighborhood in Chicago, which is significantly transformed.

Mick is presented as a polyglot, who believes that

> the fastest way to learn a language is to live with a woman who speaks it. . . . Besides Spanish he speaks a bit of German, Cambodian, Italian, French, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Polish, Chinese. Not that he's learned all those from women—our father spoke Polish, and in the restaurants where Mick has been employed for most of his working life English is often a second language. (259)

Dreaming of a career in acting and often complimented on his resemblance to James Dean, Mick is used to breaking the ice with strangers through his linguistic dexterity: "In New York, the surprise of a blond-haired, blue-eyed guy speaking rapid-fire street Spanish usually eases the reflexive hostility. . . . But here, no one smiles back" (262). The exchange with the

[11] The fact that Washtenaw is where Dybek himself grew up is one of numerous autobiographical elements to be found in his writing. See the entry on Dybek's family home at https://chicagoliteraryhof.org/literary_chicago_map/landmark/stuart-dybek

[12] For a discussion of food as an important vehicle of ethnic and family tradition in Dybek's writing, see my essay "You Are What You Eat: Narrating Ethnic Identity Through Food in Polish Chicagoan Writing."

Mexican youngsters turns ever more hostile and culminates in Mick's fleeing the scene. Mick realizes that what he was looking for in his return to the old neighborhood was "the smell of a past that sometimes feels more real than the present, a childhood in which degrees of reality were never a consideration, when reality and the sense of identity that went with it were taken for granted" (270). Before escaping, he is also made aware of the linguistic blunder that he has unwittingly committed: "'*Está hablando español boricua chingau. Aquí es un barrio Mexicano*,' the heavyset guy says: You talk like a fucking PR" (272). Mick's accent is indeed Puerto Rican, a linguistic remnant of his recently failed romantic relationship, and that clearly aggravates the hostility of the Mexican kids. Mick's failure to navigate the multiple languages of his neighborhood can be read as a testimony to his uprootedness and alienation. At this moment he seems a perfect illustration of the claim made by Thomas S. Gladsky regarding Dybek's characters:

> Demographic shifts, urban blight and renewal, the rejection of the past have produced anxiety and doubt. His [Dybek's] "Poles," unable to resist these changes and yet part of them, sense that something has vanished: the old neighborhood, cultural promises, the assurance of heritage. Alienation, exile, and anonymity, new passwords for ethnicity, govern the[ir] lives. (*Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves* 259)

As Dobozy argues, in Dybek's narratives of return to the old neighborhood, return constitutes "an experience in which the apparently organic unity of self and cultural origin is broken, and selfhood emerges as irreducibly social, derived from political and cultural circumstance, and in which culture becomes contextual rather than definitive" (191).

While the dominant language of the neighborhood has clearly changed, reflecting the processes of ethnic succession, the material structures—Mick's family home and backyard—remain. Fleeing from the increasingly hostile Mexican American youth, Mick runs

> past the defunct 3 V's Birdseed Factory, whose windows once broadcast the cries of caged exotic birds. Its walls are spray-painted in the style of Siqueiros. The peeling murals make the factory appear to be disintegrating along with its superimposed bandoliered angels and peons who ride rearing Quetzalcoatls auraed in fire, its mariachi whose guitars gush at their center holes intro rivers of blood and orchids, and its olive-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe. (Dybek, *I Sailed with Magellan* 274–75)

Although the reference to a defunct factory may bring to mind depictions of urban blight in "Hot Ice," in "Qué Quieres" Dybek is more interested

in rendering urban change through linguistic and cultural references. The peeling mural on the factory's wall is a testimony to the dominance of Mexican culture in the neighborhood, as made clear by the abundant allusions to Mexican painting and mythology. Still, the mural does not alter the character of the building's material structure, but is rather superimposed on it, illustrating perhaps the changeability of urban orders, whereby one group of inhabitants occupies an area for a while and is promptly replaced by another, in the very same fashion as one graffiti artist may paint over another's work.[13]

To conclude, the two stories analyzed in this essay are representative of Stuart Dybek's larger literary project of chronicling the ethnic neighborhood in which he grew up. Both texts showcase change as an inevitable component of urban reality by creating palimpsestic images of the neighborhood, whereby the past, present, and future orders do not neatly follow one another but rather coexist, reflective of the narratives' fusion of the protagonists' current experiences, past memories, and future plans. "Hot Ice" problematizes urban change mostly through demonstrating the demolition of material structures in the context of post-WWII urban renewal. "Qué Quieres," in turn, is built on linguistic and cultural referents to render the hostility of ethnic groups forced by their social class and ethnicity to share the same urban space. The usage of several languages in the neighborhood—Polish, Spanish, and English—construes Chicago as a multicultural metropolis, while at the same time pointing to the hierarchical character of the multilingual city. Even though translation is a necessary tool of communication in ethnically diverse communities, in and of itself it does not overturn the hierarchical linguistic structure of the neighborhood—with its mainstream English, dominant Spanish, and disappearing Polish.

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[13] As a matter of fact, Pilsen/Little Village is well-known for its street art; as Gellman writes, the "ethnic shift [from Slavs to Hispanics] spurred cultural changes in Pilsen, as Mexican artists decorated the neighborhood with colorful murals and mosaics" (608).

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