



CHARLES BUKOWSKI AND AMERICAN IDENTITY: A CRITICAL OBSERVATION

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Abstract

In the prose, poetry, short stories and interviews from 1940 to 1994 that constitute Charles Bukowski's writings the author revisits a concern that permeates his entire body of work. The struggle to define himself as a poet, novelist, man, and worker he creates in the context of lowlife writing in American English literature. Bukowski's work demonstrates a constantly evolving aesthetic, influenced by his reading, and working. Discussing Bukowski's relationship to American identity, this essay examines how his lowlife writings reflect his critical framework, literary dexterity, influences, and perspective on writing. It explores Bukowski's use of personal criticism/autobiography, his loyalty to Los Angeles, his literary influences, and the impact of his lowlife identity background on his work, to highlight his vexed position and what this essay perceives as his highly subjective perspective on dislocation. The article argues that although Bukowski's background and subject matter defy easy categorization, his possession of an American citizenship and identity, along with his central themes mark him as a contemporary and pioneering American lowlife writer, with all of the challenges and triumphs that this label implies.

Keywords: *Charles Bukowski, dislocation, identity, lowlife, Los Angeles.*

Introduction

In the body of prose, poetry, letters and interviews from 1940 to 1994, that constitute Charles Bukowski's oeuvre the author revisits a concern that permeates his entire body of work: the struggle to define himself as a poet, scholar, man, and outsider in America. He creates in the context of his writing a countercultural way in American English literature. Bukowski's works demonstrate a constantly evolving aesthetic, influenced by his experience, reading, and writing. Discussing Bukowski's relationship to American identity, this essay focuses primarily, and exclusively, on the world of his writings, exploring how that text reflects his critical framework, literary dexterity, influences, and perspective on writing. The essay examines Bukowski's use of personal criticism/autobiographical writing, his loyalty to America and Los Angeles in particular. It also discusses him as a self-identified writer of lowlife, his American literary influences, and the impact of his transnational background on his work to highlight his vexed position and his highly subjective perspective on dislocation. The paper argues about Bukowski's background and subject matter defy easy categorization, his possession of an American passport, along with his central themes, mark him as a contemporary and pioneering American lowlife writer, with all of the challenges and triumphs that this label implies.

Bukowski's life and work embody the struggles that face the vast majority of outsiders – principally, gaining acceptance in a nation that has often perceived, and thus treated, as perpetual foreigners, strangers, and outsiders. Bukowski's literary reputation paved a path for himself and fellow outsiders. Over the years, he has changed the definition of outsider's identity and, in the process, expanded the idea of what characterizes an American citizen and an American sensibility. While rooted in a range of experience, Bukowski has never let his ethnicity reduce or limit his creativity and humanity. While he frames his personal self as transitory, and wrestles with the disturbance that such instability may bring to his writing. He maintains a distinct and clear identity as an American poet, author of lowlife background.

Bukowski and Los Angeles as Home

Bukowski's work, life, and passions embody many tropes of the classic first generation American immigrant tale of a particular period. He may propose that his writing resists such



categorization, but his avowed need for his focus on the transitory nature of the individual, and his experimentation with diverse literary genres demonstrate that gave him American literary identity. His unique voice and challenge to form is a result of his personal hybridization of language, unmistakably forged from a strong national allegiance to his adopted country.

Bukowski has always defied easy critical categorization. Bukowski being ‘Outsider’ in Los Angeles, and he proudly wears the badge of Los Angeles underground writer, as is evident in much of his writing. Such labels are often seen as interchangeable, origins – the ones Bukowski examines in his work *Notes of Dirty Old Man* his collected work and personal criticism to express several concerns. Firstly, difficulty of becoming writer, as his role models did, such as Hemingway, Lawrence, and Comus. Secondly, writing with a heteroglossic emphasis through the lens of an immigrant between cultures and nations. Bukowski belongs to the highly visible and vocal group of American writers with transnational sensibilities who have tried to come to the forefront of American literature.

This paper states that Bukowski fits squarely into the expanding group of transnational outside writers which include, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, Jack Kerouac, Amari Baraka, Allen Ginsburg among others. These writers have enriched American literature through their engagement with border crossings, and directly challenge received paradigms of a national literature and American identity. Like these writers Bukowski, has been accepted as participant in a white unitary culture of America via his literary skills and lowlife background. Yet, at the same time, he has opened the definition of a modern America in the twentieth century. While he cites literary influences from their culture of origin, he writes exclusively in English and freely draw upon multiple cultures and places for inspiration. Bukowski differs as a result of his formative childhood in Los Angeles – he remains the only acclaimed writer of German descent to have spent a considerable part of his life in America.

The Complications of the Self and Outsider: Birth to Death

Bukowski’s early life was defined by sweeping and diverse geographical movement. He was born in Germany and raised in Los Angeles of America from the age of two. His childhood serves as a crucial locus of memory from which springs his attitude to longing, language and writing with lot of hardships. He declared Los Angeles as his home for years and that home must be carried within himself and his writings. This city gave him the raw material that he drew upon to write, but that led to an often painful self-identification as a displaced person.

Bukowski also wears and chooses the displacement made possible by poverty, affluence, technology, and geographic mobility, and references his country of ethnic origin or citizenship, but may or may not detail characters, subjects, and ideas that reflect his claimed ethnic identity. Transnational mobility allows for a flexible definition of self, and mitigates the pressure to conform to any specific ideal that helped him for both emotionally wrenching and artistically freeing.

Bukowski’s American identity is complicated due to his own interpretation of his writing. English language writing is laborious to acquire, it is of paramount importance to many, including Bukowski. Bukowski’s lines include verbs of action and strength, demonstrating how poetry is a means of giving voice and expressing defiance. As a young, Bukowski hid his writing under his bed and away from his father, embarrassed that his intimate beliefs could not favour. Only later did Bukowski long to share his poetry with the public, and with this came the complicated questions of participation, place, and belonging. Bukowski refuses to claim American culture, feeling that it is full of false and exploitations. For Bukowski, displacement/loneliness is a source of creative empowerment.

Bukowski maintains his stature as a pioneer, which, in its myth-making possibilities and the myriad of associations it inspires. Bukowski expands the definition and behaviors understood as American. Some critics, however, may legitimately insist upon his status as a German, not as an American descent. But Bukowski remains an icon: a classic example of a naturalized citizen and an



American who successfully published his writings in the middle of the twentieth century. Difference makes him an outsider, but he possesses insider status. Ultimately, American identity is open to broad interpretation, not only by Bukowski, who views his American identity as only one aspect of his complex self. He compares himself to a plant that has yet to spread and unfold. Bukowski insists that a writer's creative locus is more relevant than his geographical situation; this may not have a physical location, but possibly exists in an emotional well from which his writing is born.

Bukowski's Dislocation/Loneliness and Writing

For Bukowski, home is found in memory, the creation of poetry, and his perception of permanent dislocation. His need to make sense of his place in the world and seek refuge in a single location drives his writing's focus on the languages, cultures, and experiences that have defined his life. Dislocation, a state of disembodied transience, drives Bukowski's work, and he inhabits this zone to survive. Dislocation enables his writing, as he uses it to redefine his place in the world. Bukowski finds poetry from a disjointed position; it is not a purgatory, but a place where his thoughts move and his mind invents words and ideas. That enabled him to create a sense of belonging.

As an outsider who subscribes to the concept of literal and metaphorical immigrant, Bukowski fosters a sensibility that reconfigures the world, since the idea of displacement. He personalizes the experience of space and age through the subjective perspective of movement and of understanding a world. Though he is not a travel writer, his emphasis on displacement and the experience of moving between cultures suggests a similar purpose. Like a travel writer, Bukowski translates multiple spaces, experiences, and journeys.

Bukowski's writing is based on the ideology of the movement. Economic and cultural privilege grant his mobility, the permission to claim migrant, and the wherewithal to seek sanctuary in the act of translation and adaptation as he cycles between the genres and cultures of America. While his privilege does not wholly shelter him from issues that pervade American life, his level of privilege is unimaginable to the vast majority of Americans, particularly those with ethnic minority status. Bukowski's claim of dislocation prompts serious questions. What are the expectations and desires that individuals such as Bukowski have of any nation? And how does one configure an individual identity within American citizenship?

Bukowski's self-identification as a dislocated subject is problematic. But, Bukowski's desire for an open society speaks to the complications of diversity and an idealized belief in community. Bukowski's position as a transnational author problematizes his claims of dislocation in a strict analytical sense. True dislocation requires a complete limitation to a place where one does feel and experience a lack of mobility for economic or political reasons. Dislocation or loneliness implies the inability to return or to move forward a paralysis or hindrance from dysfunction in a current state, or a lack of sanctuary in a temporary or permanent refuge. But, Bukowski's map is of writings fraught with turmoil and anxiety in America. As such, he embodies a historic and emblematic part of the American condition. America has a strong class system and racial hierarchy but believes in the reinvention of the self. It supports a highly independent and individualized belief system and interpretation of what constitutes hegemonic American cultural qualities.

Dislocation or loneliness in respect to Charles Bukowski gives the ability to reframe an idea, object, or situation from various angles and perspectives. The USA can be profoundly fluid and mobile, geographically or psychologically for him. This often leads to great upheaval, confusion, or rupture. This idealized journey of crisscrossing a vast continent and leaving home in order to claim or reinvent a self remains intrinsic to this tendency of Bukowski. This perspective on Bukowski's dislocation/loneliness allows an interesting challenge to his current philosophy to reorganize his subject and self-allowing the American ideology of rupture and reinvention to be further reconfigured. It brings into stark relief that a single writer from a particular background and



viewpoint can modify the national sense of an American self and American literature. Bukowski has conflicting feelings about personal borders, yet claims an American identity.

Bukowski positions himself beyond the circle of convention, and wrestles with the traditional stance of an artist, with the realities of his gender and cultural background. His writing is bound to his cultural heritage and occupation. Bukowski cites writers he shares little in common with, firmly ensconcing himself in a castle of memory, movement, literature, and the dream of home. The fortification that protects the fragility of his ideas is an absolute belief that the possibilities of writing triumph over a single agenda – artistic, political, or cultural. Bukowski understands the aesthetic choices prompted and bound by experiences peculiar to his life, and readily speaks of the plethora of diverse transnational influences that have shaped and pervaded his writing. Friedman argues that the idyllic home is a “never never land of dreams and desire. Home is utopia – a no place, a nowhere, an imaginary space longed for, always already lost in the very formation of the idea of home”. (Friedman, 192) In this hallowed place marked by absence, Bukowski laments the lack of longitudinal or latitudinal coordinates and retreats to the memory of transit sites in America.

Bukowski’s creativity is rooted in his memories and longings for American society. Memory is “the first rewriting of home, an act of re-presentation of what was as the precondition for writing home in the medium of text—the page, the book as the corpus of memory” (Friedman, “Bodies on the Move” 206). He believes that to create, he needs a home, but his home partially exists beyond of his reach. He writes frequently of Los Angeles, a city he consciously made home. He retreats to an artistic belief that art is fragmented memory carried within the soul; beauty arises from chaos and disorder, and “the rapture of writing rupture” will sustain his creativity. Los Angeles for Bukowski is a primal destination of silence, music, and ideas, and it harbors a subconscious yearning that pulls forth images sculpted into words.

Bukowski and Autobiographical Writing

Throughout his writings, Bukowski uses the frame of personalisation to theorize his writing. He personalizes his conversation about literature, inserting himself into the discussion as both a fellow writer and a character. Like life writing, personal criticism shares qualities with autobiography in its use of prose, poetic structure, and confessional tone. Many critics have referred to personal criticism as a crossover genre favored by those from marginalized positions. Bukowski uses personal criticism to interrogate the dominant intellectual and social paradigm in the USA. He asserts control over both his creative content and the theoretical base from which his work is critiqued. Personal criticism, scholarly autobiography, or crossover writing gives traditionally silenced perspectives a voice, and questions of critical norms. In his writings, Bukowski provocatively spins an eloquent and emotionally charged web of personal history. Readers of Bukowski’s writings bear witness to seminal moments of his identity formation, from childhood to death through Henry Chinaki his alter-ego in five of his six novels and in many short stories. Bukowski writes masterfully in American English, and is fiercely loyal to the language in his art, describing himself as a new American poet [who] thinks in marginalised tongues, all of which flow into the English he uses: a language that blossoms for his writing. He expresses his views himself as a poet who is cast out of place rather than secure place, a poet who must reckon with radical dislocation, whose roots are as imaginary and visceral. So this paper believes that his perceived dislocation is no longer unusual, and this configuration of identity and feelings is common to naturalized American citizens and those who find themselves estranged from the American dream.

Immigrants mentioned above through their writings attend the task of nation-building, define citizenship and culture, and perpetuate both myths and truths about America. Bukowski moved to the USA in 1923, and became a naturalized US citizen later. Literature provokes Bukowski to reflect upon the circumstance of his reading a particular writer, the work that writer not only propelled him, but also triggered his memories and moments from a very distant past. His experiences deserve inclusion in the national narrative as part of the American culture. Bukowski’s history is



transnational, multilingual, cross-cultural, postcolonial, political, and poetic. Importantly, he believed that an autobiography affirmed his presence as an American.

Bukowski's writing involves creating a home and using this mental or physical space to understand his individuality in relation to community, family, culture, and nation. Bukowski's autobiographical criticism allows him to make sense of his writing process. By framing his literary discussions in a self-referential third-person style, Bukowski places his own self and writing within the history of literature as an active, if a not equal, participant, and asserts his own bid for entry into a canon of America. The writers he discusses are those he admires and whom he claims are his peers. To position himself in the third person allows the reader to see him as more distant, leading the reader to place him within the long continuum of American literature. Bukowski's stature and placement within any canon will be secondary, but to establish his place for himself within his personal criticism is a bold and assertive move in America.

In his writings: prose, poetry, short stories, and letters the reader gains insight into Bukowski's work as his reading and life experiences are reflected and refracted in his literary output. As some writers state that writing is knowledge, a first knowledge that allows us to crystallize the chaotic press of experience, and illuminate, if only for a moment, the dark horizon of our lives. His poetry and personal prose are rooted in autobiography. Between these two forms continuity, overlap, opposition, or identity are existed.

Importantly as well, classic American poets led Bukowski to unexpected conclusions about his immigrant journey and prompted a reexamination of himself. Bukowski claims a place in the USA through many American poets. One of the most powerful ways that Bukowski demonstrates American literary identity is his articulation of an understanding of himself as marginalized in the USA. Bukowski's self-identification as a marginalised writer is his awareness of his existence inhabiting American space, and his desire to dialogue on national issues in his adopted country. But, the fact remains that "race will always be at the center of the American experience" as a crucial paradigm for negotiation in American life. Therefore Bukowski's oeuvre reveals strong feelings about injustices, perpetrated both domestically and socially. He refutes the American Dream through his writing, takes pride in his cultural background, and writes that mainstream-American thinking about race and ethnicity must change.

Bukowski's Status as "Outsider"

Bukowski is aware of his status as an "Outsider" in the USA and uses his personal experience to call attention to those who face similar challenges. The question of race is one of the most pivotal and dominant issues in the American political landscape. In discussing lowlife questions within US borders, he shows his self-identification as an ethnic minority living in American society. For Bukowski writing literature is full of complications that too against American hegemonic culture where he is living. The ways he took to change the history of the literary canon of American literature are very significant. They produced a profound rebellion in him against the social order. He did it for the sake of his country for the good of his country because where he is identified as citizen and writer. Bukowski details his own struggle with this power dynamic and the many ways he is perceived in US society. Writing saves him; through it he confronts the American culture, circling back to his origins, rippling out to the wider world, and redefining his cultural origin and his adopted country. Bukowski knowingly or unknowingly subscribes to his own philosophy of background, culture, and experience of America. Therefore, Bukowski engages the gray spaces, the hazy areas of change, and movement in his writing, as the claiming of any label compels an obligation to speak on behalf of a group or cause, with an agenda undefined by himself. The key factor, that cements Bukowski's American identity, is his use of American English for creative expression.

Despite the contradictions, Bukowski's writing reveals that he understands the challenges faced by lowlife artists. He writes fearlessly about the violence of divisiveness, exploitation and injustice. He also pushes the boundaries of form because, as a lowlife writer, he has little choice.



This is the forced reckoning with texts and self without a clear direction of how or even why one might write. He calls writing rough-and-ready things, its order crude, its necessity beyond the purchase of self-invention. There is something here in the body, pain or pleasure, crying out for a sense that we need to attend to. Bukowski speculates that a fully developed writer in a hierarchical society of America established his aesthetics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bukowski fashions a very specific identity as an outside American writer. Despite as he is German immigrant, he still claims America as his home. In doing so, Bukowski demonstrates that dislocation is part of the American experience, and envisioning what it means to be American. A sense of national belonging may take years to evolve, and may never be achieved, but for Bukowski, language, and literature offer the best means through which to negotiate American identity.

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