

## **Cafés, Cocktail Coves, and “Empathy Walls”: *Comparing Urban and Exurban Everyday Life through a Lefebvrian lens***

### **I. Introduction: Urban and Exurban, *De-Centering the Center***

Right-wing rioters stormed and desecrated the United States Capitol on 6 January 2021, resulting in the erection of security walls around the normally-accessible center of Washington, DC. Walls, it seems, have become leitmotifs, poignant symbols of the broader divides and dissonances in the United States today. Cities – portrayed as existing on one side of the wall, and exurbs, conceived as on the other side – have also taken on powerful associations and representations in, and beyond, the U.S. Neel (2018) writes of emerging landscapes of autonomous, reactionary “compounds” in the exurbs, or “far hinterland”, which are “outside the palace walls”, with cities correspondingly framed as the “palaces”, gated centers of global capital, power, and liberal institutions.

However, the relationship between urban and exurban is not a stable one, though it is mutually constitutive, with each deeply entangled in the other, enmeshed in processes of (de)centering and inversion. New centers form around moments and sites of social and political potential, through processes of “implosions and explosions” (Lefebvre, 2003, 14) which, for Lefebvre, formed the dynamic relationship between urban-center and urban-periphery. Where, exactly, the center(s) or peripher(ies) actually exist, the ingredients of their affective natures, and how social relations produce them around contextually-specific sites, are questions deserving of a closer look across today’s polycentric/polymorphic urban field.

In the following, we ask: how is social space produced, practiced, and defended, across urban and exurban terrains, which are conceived and portrayed as inherently different? What political potential(s) might thus emerge, perhaps even radical solidarities, around cross-boundary issues and struggles such as access to public space, environmental justice, or shared desires for amenities, sociality and joy?

The sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) writes of the “empathy walls” that make one person’s perspective and daily intricacies “strange” to another’s. At a time of heightened political hyperpolarization and socio-cultural fissures in the United States and elsewhere, the “empathy wall” can seem impermeable and insurmountable. This extends to how urban center and urban peripheries are conceived, discursively and ontologically constructed, and valorized or stigmatized along racial, class, and ideological striations and binaries. We argue that, though often portrayed as facing each-other from opposite sides of the “empathy wall”, urban and exurban deserve to enter conversation with each other through comparative urban explorations via a site-specific “social ontology” (Kinkaid, 2020), and that there is a gap in research that attempts this type of cross-boundary conversation.

We suggest that Lefebvre offers a productive framework for such a comparison, and that his conceptions of *center versus periphery* (“implosions/explosions”, 2003), the triad of the production of space (1991) and his framing of everyday life as an “oeuvre” (1996), have valuable resonance for approaching the socio-spatial dialectics of contemporary urban and exurban settings. Harvey (1989, 265), reflecting upon Lefebvre's ideas, claimed that “different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways.” We read this notion of “radical difference”, however, as a potentially productive force, with latent, exciting, transformative political possibilities, that transcend easy (and reductionist) binaries

like (political-cultural) “right” versus “left”, or tropes like “inner” vs. “outer” city. Therefore, we investigate difference, drawing from the site-specific lens of an ethnographic comparative urban ontology which is attuned to difference, by looking across diverse embodiments in localized spatial production.

We approach the contemporary urban/exurban dynamic through a selection of ethnographic observations and anecdotes from two case study sites: urban South Shore, Chicago; and exurban Lake Norman, North Carolina, in metropolitan Charlotte. We suggest these sites are inextricably linked and relationally entangled with each other, but also, that they embody and represent the polemical and antagonistic construction of urban versus exurban (or anti-urban, reactionary) geographies. While we reflect upon the U.S. context, we also suggest broader relevance to the way urban and periphery are conceived and deployed in other global contexts, and that such antagonistic constructions can be seen elsewhere, albeit in site-specific morphologies.

However, we do not frame these sites as homogenous blocs that follow specific patterns, nor do we see them as fixed socio-spatial containers. While acknowledging and appreciating their undeniably unique socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., majority-Black and Democratic-voting South Shore, Chicago vs. majority-white and Republican-voting exurban North Carolina), distinct histories, and particular urban crises, we approach the cases as heterogenous fields of possibility, hybridity, emergence and tension. It is seductive, yet reductive, we argue, to take the popular-cultural symbolic representations of urban/exurban at face value and join in the construction of these geographies as purely oppositional, somehow existing apart and in monolithic parallel worlds, separated by an “empathy wall” across which nothing flows. We

seek to highlight, therefore, both the similarities between and across the sites, but also the “sparkle of difference” (Cockayne et al., 2017) which renders daily life kinetically emanant.

In the following sections, we firstly deconstruct urban and exurban as conceptual frames, and reconcile the conflict between the site-specific histories, politics and cultural characteristics that render each place unique, to how histories, legacies and futures are entangled and deeply interrelated. We then engage Lefebvre’s concepts of the triad of the production of space, the “implosion and explosion” of urban processes, and the framing of everyday life as an “oeuvre”, or collective work of art, with the capacity for collective joy. We situate these concepts in the context of the contemporary socio-cultural-political milieu (in the U.S. but, we suggest, with relevance beyond), and explain how and why these ideas remain valuable conceptual tools and why we believe these concepts invite ongoing and novel readings which correspond with (and help make sense of) changing urban dialectics and patterns.

Next, we outline why and how our specific comparative cases were chosen, and the rationale for our relational methodology. This contains a contextual overview of the two sites and how and why their individual histories are distinctly tied to local political, economic and cultural settings, but also, how they are linked to each other in notable ways. We will elaborate upon our site-based and digital ethnography, and why our social ontology animates these two cases and allows them to speak to each other productively.

Finally, we will share a selection of observations and ethnographic anecdotes where we extend Lefebvre’s framework by applying our own novel taxonomy of spatial production which corresponds to important local sites across our two cases. These are: a) *spaces of social encounters and collective joy (the oeuvre)*, like cafés, backyards, lake coves and gyms (spatial

practice); b) *spaces of divergence and stigma*, like political districts, municipal borders, or social media forums (represented space), and finally, c) *spaces of connection*, where political solidarities and contestations might emerge around specific issues or movements in ways that bring our cases together (representational space). Through our spatial trialectic, we encounter “implosions and explosions” of capital flows, and the formation of ephemeral and dynamic new urban centers, sparkling with (radical) political potential.

We conclude the paper with some reflection on the possibilities for hopeful political reconfigurations and points of solidarity and advance some ideas for further socio-spatial research that might push along such dialogues, in light of current political polarization and socio-cultural-spatial fragmentation.

## **II. Deconstructing (American) Urban and Exurban**

Specifically, this article addresses three key gaps in geographical research. The first surrounds how the American “urban” is often framed through the trope of the “inner city” and the residual associations, constructions, and legacies of “the ghetto” and related territorial stigmatization (Schwarze, 2021). This was starkly evident under the doctrine and rhetorical violence of Trumpism, when urban environments were deployed as negative political signifiers and nasty buzzwords in order to gain popular support among suburban, exurban and rural voters (e.g., Trump demonizing cities like Chicago and Baltimore at campaign rallies, or via virally-circulated images of Black Lives Matters or Antifa protests in cities by Trump supporters and on social media). The irony of Trump deploying such language while simultaneously owning a luxury tower in Chicago embodies the sort of tension and contradiction that we hope our paper teases.

We acknowledge the profoundly structurally-racist and unjust nexus of real estate interests, political leadership, policing and surveillance, and economic shifts (including disinvestment and gentrification), which have resulted in segregation and deeply concentrated, compound and multi-generational urban poverty and malaise, especially for African-Americans and other communities of color (Sugrue, 1996; Lipzits 2011). Correspondingly, though, we aim to avoid essentializing the stigmatized characteristics of the trope of the “inner city”, which have become weaponized in popular rhetoric and amplified through the bullhorns of Trumpism and related right-populist media celebrities. We recognize the distinct character of urban South Chicago, which was born out of deliberate and engineered crises and cycles of racialized violence, disinvestment, appropriation, and re-investment (Sugrue, 1996; Smith, 1996), but which remains a heterogeneous and diverse urban space. For example, we recognize that processes like decline or gentrification play-out in differentiated and contextual ways (Wilson and Heil, 2020), and that there are wide spectra of class identifications, economic stratifications and cultural-ideological perspectives and worldviews within and across urban communities of color. Poor urban areas are not uniformly poor; decline and gentrification occur at different speeds and via different assemblages and power geometries.

Questions of Black-led gentrification and related intra-neighborhood class tensions and hierarchies, for example, are crucial for understanding everyday life in Black urban Chicago (Banks, 2009; Moore, 2009). Thereby, Black urban areas cannot be (nor should be) reduced simply to blanket categorical descriptors like “poor” or “declining”, even though in many cases, these areas are still marked by entrenched poverty and socio-spatial and racial segregation, lower life expectancies, and other geographical barriers like higher levels of environmental toxins, food deserts, or health inequalities as the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic shows (Millet et al., 2020). Thus, urban communities of color are complicated and diverse webs of everyday

socio-spatial practices through which class, identity, and representation are constantly negotiated.

The second gap we address is the lack of critical discussion of the textures of the “exurb” in urban geography, and its relationship with the urban. The exurb (also known as peri-urban, or, as Neel (2018) frames, the “far hinterland”), situated at the interface of the city and the rural, is not quite urban, but also not quite suburban. Suburbs (as traditionally conceived, as commuter belts adjacent to core cities) in the United States often have more in common with the urban core than they do with the outer-urban periphery, at least in a socio-demographic, cultural, and political sense. The 2020 U.S. presidential election results, and 2020 US census figures, show that urbanized-inner-suburban counties often have an increasingly racially, socio-economically and politically diverse electorate (exemplified by ‘swing counties’ like Oakland County, Michigan; Gwinnett County, Georgia; or Bucks County, Pennsylvania). Exurbs, however, beyond this inner belt, are some of the fastest-growing counties, and remain bastions of political conservatism, whiteness, and the far-right in the United States (Neel, 2018; Whiton, 2021), having not yet seen the cultural shifts observed closer to the core city.

Recent work in geography (Keil, 2017; Schmid et al., 2018) have brought “the suburb” into central theoretical exploration, somewhat leaving the exurb out in the cold. As demonstrated by movements like Trumpism, the exurbs are influential political centers and the breeding grounds for reactionary cultures. We follow authors like Brinkley (2018) in suggesting that exurbs are poorly theorized: lost and obscured, conceptually, between city, suburb, and rural, but vital to understand given their political, economic and cultural weight. Therefore, we feel it is urgent to put exurb into conversation with the urban, thereby de-centering the center and centering the periphery. But as with the urban, we seek to avoid essentialist language and

categorial fixities about what the exurb is, or is not. Whilst the exurban setting in our discussion is relatively affluent and fast-growing, it also contains pockets of poverty and compounded social, economic and health problems, not to mention layers of racial, ethnic cultural and political diversity. Indeed, rural counties represent some of the starkest poverty and poorest health outcomes across all racial groups in the United States (Neel, 2018). The exurbs are, like urban areas, sometimes sites of environmental degradation and industrial toxins, with severe impacts for public health. Hochschild (2016) illustrates this facet in Louisiana’s “cancer alley”, a string of semi-rural and exurban communities with higher cancer rates due to toxins from local oil and gas refineries. Rural America is also blighted by drug addiction, notably the scourges of methamphetamines and opiates.

Finally, the exurbs are discursively stigmatized by popular culture and media pundits as a representation of Trumpism when, of course, not everyone in the exurb voted for Trump, and as a ‘white-nationalist’ heartland when, of course, not everyone in the exurbs is white, or a nationalist. Thus, territorial stigmatization is critical for understanding public imaginaries of the exurban, and we follow Nayak (2019) who likewise offers correctives to stigmas and stereotypes around local places and postindustrial whiteness. Substantively, we suggest that mutual territorial stigmatizations, albeit via different race, class and political constructions, may be one point of commonality across urban and exurban, and that neither should be reduced to a prescribed set of assumptions or stereotypes.

The third key gap we address is a lack of spatial understanding of the geographies of the new political right, a conceptual blind spot that Ince (2019) forcefully argues is vital to overcome in order to begin to build an ontological language for anti-fascism, and to identify possible points of deradicalization, dialogue, and solidarity. The geographies of the political and cultural



left are more-frequently studied, leaving a perilous opening for radical-right insurgencies to strike, catching researchers (and society) unawares. As Miller (2020) laments, emergent radical-right movements like Trumpism and nascent neo-fascisms do not arise out of nothing, but from the assemblage of daily life; too often, though, such emergences are overlooked. We do not suggest that exurbs are always right-wing, or that cities are always left-leaning, or that these categories are stable and easy to differentiate: that would fall back upon the essentialisms we strive to avoid. Rather, we stress the importance of probing the textures of everyday life that give rise to identities, ideologies and affective natures of “right” and “left” affixing to space and territory.

The relationship between the populist-political right and the exurbs is not a discussion limited to the United States. Our exploration also helps join-together emerging research from Western Europe and other places (e.g., Brazil; see Doval and Sourajoun, 2021), which have also seen a proliferation of radical-right support at the (geographical) periphery of urban areas, and which relate to themes of urban/exurban/rural tensions, such as in Northern Italy surrounding Milan (Agnew et al., 2002), outside Dutch cities (Van Gent et al., 2014; Damhuis, 2020), in the UK after “Brexit” (Bachman and Sidaway, 2016), and in Germany with the rise of the AfD (a radical-right populist party) (Fortner et al., 2020). However, whereas Fortner et al., (2020), for example, focus on the lack of difference in exurban/rural Germany as key to radical-right support, we look for difference itself as a stimulus for a variety of political possibilities which transcend an easy binary of “right” or “left”. We draw inspiration from other important research in Europe that is now devoted to understanding why and how cities and their (exurban, rural) peripheries give rise to political polarization and radical-right insurgencies: for example, the

work coming from the pan-European ERPI cluster (Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative),<sup>1</sup> which brings together academic research, practitioners, activists and policymakers for joined-up conversations. These are generally more cohesive networks than those in an American context which is still grappling with the fallout from Trumpism and the preconditions from which it emerged (and continues to mutate, beyond the presidency itself).

A key task in unmasking radical-right geographies is a need to trouble the false binary between liberal-urban and illiberal-exurban, as if these are monolithic totalities or stable categories (which they are not). Brown et al. (2021) note the importance of mainstream urban sites and spaces for right-radicalization in daily life, which often are more banal than spectacular events like marches, rallies or riots (like 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021). Mondon and Winter (2020) argue that illiberal and reactionary processes – such as those that uphold racism and segregation, structural poverty and dispossession, state violence and evictions – are deeply entrenched in mainstream life and governance across liberal democracies (and cities). These conclusions can certainly be observed in the way urban police forces in some of America’s most liberal cities (such as Minneapolis) have been instigators of racist violence (e.g., the murder of George Floyd), but also in the way liberal mayors and Democratic city governments have facilitated violent processes of gentrification and uneven urban development (Smith, 1996). The paradox that some of the most “liberal” cities are also some of the most economically unequal and racially segregated has been noted (Florida, 2017). Correspondingly, to render an entire exurb “illiberal” threatens to obscure the pockets of progressivisms that exist alongside reactionary currents.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-networks/emancipatory-rural-politics-initiative> (Accessed 29 July 2021).

The fourth and final gap we address is the need to re-frame what constitutes the urban “center”, including the changing nature and dynamic of public space, which is increasingly hybridized and semi-privatized. Polycentric and polymorphic urbanization (in different formats depending on global context) have changed the dynamic between, for example, a city’s central business districts and its outskirts, where in some cases economic, political and cultural power may be more concentrated outside the city than within its boundaries. As Neel (2018, 119-120) states, “Rather than attempting to pin down what, exactly, is the proper outer border of ... a city, it makes more sense simply to acknowledge that the old categories of urban, suburban and rural may simply have less explanatory power for the contemporary capitalist city than they once had.” This stretching and poly-centric reconfiguration of the urban can be observed in various milieus like Silicon Valley (which exists as a suburban sprawl of tech campuses forming their own urban centers) to the way that economic flows and supply chains have concentrated urbanization along highways and near airports (Kasarda et al., 2011). Neoliberal urban development mechanisms over decades have accelerated the privatization, enclosure and surveillance of traditional public space (Luger and Lees, 2020) and this is especially evident in exurban landscapes of gated communities, shopping centers and highway-driven urban forms.

All this is to say that the shifting textures of “center” and “periphery”, and notions of public space, deserve a re-think, as new social and political sites emerge. In our exploration, we propose that chain retailers like *Starbucks*; residential front stoops and driveways; lake coves and exurban gyms may not look like “centers” or fit the definition of public space, but nevertheless function as important sites of political potential and social exchange across urban and exurban spaces. The rise of platform urbanism means that these mundane sites of daily life stretch into social media and are, too, relationally informed by cyber-networks, (re)produced offline and online, through even more hybrid forms of private gates and cyber-commons. The

restrictions on access to physical sites during the Covid-19 pandemic reinforced the visibility and importance of virtual space and (private) platform-hosted social media as extensions and supplements to, but not replacements of, physical sites. Thus, a more capacious reading of public space, and urban/exurban centrality and everyday reality, allows for otherwise obscured social and political moments to become visible.

### **III. (Re)Engaging with Lefebvre's Dynamic, Extendable, Spatial Framework**

Lefebvre's theories on the production of space, urbanization and everyday life, have been approached in recent decades via a "third wave" of Lefebvre scholarship (Goonewardena et al., 2008) which has sought to reorient scholarship on Lefebvre towards a close and critical reading of his actual texts without adopting a pre-defined theoretical lens, and to make his urban and spatial concepts fruitful to empirical research. Critically engaging with this "third wave", we suggest that Lefebvre offers a dynamic and flexible language that can be interpreted as a reconciliation between planetary urban theorizing (Schmid, 2018) and comparative empirical research. In other words, balancing the tension between Marxian approaches and phenomenological readings of daily life, as Kinkaid (2020) argues, opens up spaces of possibility, connection, and political emergence.

Within this reading of Lefebvre, we approach a few specific concepts. The first of these is that of "implosion and explosion." Lefebvre describes capitalist urbanization processes as an "explosion of spaces" that is undergirded by the contradictory processes of homogenization and fragmentation of territories (Lefebvre, 1991, 2003). For Lefebvre, there was a simultaneous and completely integrated concentration of urban reality and an immense explosion of distinct fragments (e.g., peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space (Lefebvre,

2003, 14). We utilize this concept as a framework both to envision how urban (Chicago) and exurban (North Carolina) relate to one-another via imploding/exploding capital flows and processes, but also, how various peripheral social, cultural, economic and political centers form in spatio-temporal configurations around variegated local sites in everyday life, such as cafés, exurban gyms, or backyard social gatherings.

The second Lefebvrian concept we invoke is that of everyday life as an “oeuvre” – a collective and co-created public artwork, with the capacity for joy, difference, and surprise. Everyday life, we claim, whether in inner-city or exurb, takes place “where the perpetually transformative conflict occurs between diverse, specific rhythms: the body's polyrhythmic bundles of natural rhythms, physiological (natural) rhythms, and social rhythms” (Lefebvre and Régulier, 1985, 73). The daily differences that might emerge are crucial. Kinkaid (2020, 169) interprets Lefebvre’s notion of “difference” as, “formed through lived practice: sedimentations of experience. To understand the production and embodiment of difference, we must turn then to these embodied ‘sedimentations’ that form and delimit the subject of difference.” For Lefebvre (1996, 66), “[t]he city is itself ‘oeuvre’, a feature that contrasts with the irreversible tendency towards money and commerce, towards exchange and products.” Cities, for Lefebvre, “do not only contain monuments and institutional headquarters, but also spaces appropriated for entertainments, parades, promenades, festivities” (Ibid.). Therefore, we approach our cases with an eye to joyful spaces of amusement, recreation, and festival, which point to the potential for broader solidarities and collectivities.

The third Lefebvrian notion that we mobilize is that of the three-pronged taxonomy of the production of space, his spatial triad, in which space is not a physical container, but rather, a relationally-constructed field occurring via three processes. Lefebvre outlines these as, firstly:

“spatial practices”, which “structure daily life and a broader urban reality and, in so doing, ensure societal cohesion, continuity and a specific spatial competence” (Merrifield, 1993, 524). Second are “representations of space”, or what Lefebvre calls the “space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic sub-dividers and social engineers [...] the dominant space of any society” (Lefebvre, 1991, 38–9). These representations include maps and models, images (think: social media), but also, all the rhetorically and discursively symbolic power in which meaning and definitions are given to space. In other words, a key way that the powerful define and delimit a space, and thereby, a tool for oppression and division.

Finally, Lefebvre describes “spaces of representation” which denote “space as directly lived through its associations and images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” and that “[t]his is the dominated - and hence passively experienced - space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.” Spaces of representation, in other words, are the spaces created by activities of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991, 116).

We take these three concepts and apply them to our two case studies, and in doing so, translate Lefebvre’s spatial triad into our own novel taxonomy, around which we structure our empirical section. These are:

a) *Spaces of social encounters and collective joy (the oeuvre)*, like cafés, backyards, lake coves and gyms (spatial practice).

b) *Spaces of divergence and stigma*, denoting political districts and boundaries; municipal borders, or social media forums and images (representations of space).

c) *Spaces of connection*, where political solidarities and contestations might emerge around specific issues or movements in ways that bring our cases together (spaces of representation).

#### **IV. Case Selection and Methods: *Oeuvre, Divergence, Connection***

We selected two cases for ethnographic urban comparison. The first is South Shore Chicago, a community of approximately 50,000 predominantly-Black residents from a predominantly-low-income background, which lies at the heart of Chicago's Southeast Side. Rotella (2019, 6) remarks that "South Shore has [...] long been known as one of the most physically attractive parts of the South Side, blessed with good housing stock, lovely parks and beaches, convenient public transportation, and a long-established reputation for respectability." Up until the 1950s, South Shore was a white community. By the early 1960s, demographic change was underway. University-led gentrification in its surrounding communities, and racist "blockbusting" by real estate agencies accelerated demographic shifts (and white-flight), and by the mid-1970s, South Shore had become a majority-Black community. Today, more than 90 percent of South Shore's residents are Black, and more than 50 percent have an average income of less than \$25,000 per year, *American Community Survey* data show.<sup>i</sup> Politically, South Shore, as with most of Chicago, voted Democratic in the 2020 U.S. election. Across South Shore's three electoral districts (or "Wards"), 94.89 percent voted for Joe Biden, underlining that cities in the United States, particularly their Black communities, are Democratic strongholds.

Our other case is Lake Norman, located about 30 miles north of Charlotte, North Carolina's largest city. Lake Norman - North Carolina's largest lake - was originally constructed between 1959-1964 by the Duke Power, now Duke Energy, Corporation. The lake has become a popular

exurban hub for waterfront living and recreation, with dozens of large, planned communities and thousands of large homes around its 520 miles of shoreline. Along the shore of the lake is a spot known by locals as “Cocktail Cove”. “Cocktail Cove” is a social gathering place, adjacent to a peninsula on which sits an exclusive golf course community that was purchased by the Trump Organization in 2013 and now bears its name - the *Trump National Golf Club, Charlotte, at the Point*<sup>TM</sup> (Lake Norman).

Lake Norman straddles the boundaries of several North Carolina counties. On the southern side of the lake is urbanized Mecklenburg County, home of the city of Charlotte and nearly 1.2 million people (US Census, 2020)<sup>ii</sup>. Mecklenburg is racially diverse: non-Hispanic whites are less than 50 percent of the population; African-Americans represent about one-third of the county.<sup>iii</sup> Joe Biden carried the county in 2020. However, Iredell County, on the northern side of the lake, is significantly white (more than 82 percent, US Census 2020), and a conservative-political stronghold: Donald Trump carried the county by 65.5% in 2020, but his share among white voters was far higher. Lake Norman, in other words, is emblematic of the sort of geography that takes on a broader significance, as representative of the lower-density, outer-suburban interface between urban and rural that authors such as Neel (2018) have portrayed as spatial belts of reactionary and anti-urban ideologies. Here, public and private spaces blur and become hybridized around social sites like the lake itself (a sort of floating commons), and everyday configurations like supermarkets and chain gyms, which become vibrant pockets of interaction and socio-political relations – momentary centers of possibility and publicness within a low-density and privatized urban environment.

A natural question might arise as to why we do not compare South Chicago to exurban Chicago? Instead, we deliberately venture 750 miles south for our urban comparison, to the



exurbs of Charlotte. The first reason is the practical admission that we were already conducting research in the two sites, and thus had a wealth of existing ethnographic, discourse and socio-demographic data related to ongoing and multi-year research projects anchored (independently) in these two cases. This, on its own, may not seem like compelling justification for such a pairing. However, case selection need not be guided and limited by a prescribed set of characteristics or categories. Rich conclusions can be drawn from comparison of any two cases, if attention is paid to meaningful connection between them and the site-specific uniqueness of each, and if conceptual foundations are robustly constructed. For Robinson (2011, 3), all cities are comparable and already interconnected, and that cities' "embeddedness in multiple elsewhere has already drawn them into constantly shifting conversations with each other". In this case, we answer Robinson's (2011) call to look for unlike and atypical comparisons not only by pairing a large city like Chicago with a smaller (mid-sized) city like Charlotte, but by pairing a part of Chicago (South Shore) with an exurban web of communities, around the shore of Lake Norman, North Carolina, around 30 miles North of Charlotte.

That said, we start from the vantagepoint that Chicago and exurban Charlotte are already inextricably linked. At first glance these sites may seem to be diametrically opposed cases. However, we suggest our two cases do have strong linkages and entanglements. Through a political-economic lens on wider urbanization processes, economic, logistical, labor and industrial flows link metropolitan Chicago and metropolitan Charlotte in both an historical lineage and in contemporary terms. Framed this way, they reflect the "implosion and explosion" of which Lefebvre speaks, and can be seen as inversions of each other. For example, the metros are linked by human flows: many thousands of African-Americans left North Carolina during the years of the "Great Migration" and racist Jim Crow laws, when economic opportunities and (relatively) greater societal freedom led to the mass exodus of African-

Americans from the South and to Northern industrial cities like Chicago, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until around 1970. This flow has reversed in recent decades, with a new migration of African-Americans from these same industrial cities back to the South, settling in booming Sunbelt metro areas like Atlanta and Charlotte, in what some call the “Third Great Migration” (Neel, 2018, 114). Metropolitan Charlotte has also seen a large influx of white migrants - including large numbers from the Midwest - and these migrants are especially drawn to exurban locations such as our case study site (Whiton, 2021).

Moreover, both places share built environments and settlement patterns deeply undergirded by the ongoing legacies of racial discrimination and segregation, albeit, via locally-situated contexts and processes. North Carolina’s history as both an Antebellum slave state, and its 20<sup>th</sup> century status as a Jim Crow (segregationist) state (through the 1960s), has led to a contemporary patchwork of urban, semi-rural and rural racial settlement patterns that remains deeply segregated, further divided by a multitude of borders and boundaries (e.g., county lines, school districts, the ‘gerrymandering’ of Congressional political districts) that concentrates and marginalizes power along racial lines, and reinforces racial and socio-spatial segregation. As a result, metropolitan Charlotte is one of the most racially-segregated in the nation, which corresponds to some of the lowest social mobility in the nation (Luger, 2017; Samuels, 2017). Chicago, likewise, remains a deeply racially-segregated city, with its own history of racist policies and practices that resulted in the concentration (and marginalization) of Black residents to specific areas (Massey and Denton, 1993).

The two cases are linked by physical infrastructures. Interstate Highway ‘77’ joins Charlotte with the industrial heartlands of Ohio and the Great Lake Ports, and laterally, to Chicago’s web of roads and railways. Both Chicago and Charlotte are large hubs for American Airlines, a

conduit through which thousands of people shuffle between the cities' airports each day. Neel (2018, 97) harkens to Lefebvre in linking Chicago to an expanded ("exploded") urban field, via highways, rail, air and digital/immaterial infrastructures, of which exurban Charlotte forms an appendage, noting that

historically-inherited hubs (as with the processing and warehousing industries in South Chicago, an artifact of the nation's railway system's original structure) [...] then expand laterally in corridors that follow major freight routes such as interstates, railroads and rivers [...] as these corridors extend farther from logistics hubs, they also tend to narrow out into thin transit strips few stops in between.

The cases are linked, if inverted, politically: Chicago has long been a Democratic stronghold, and Black Chicago, in particular, has symbolic resonance with Democratic political power, exemplified perhaps most notably with Barack and Michelle Obama, who hail from Chicago's South Side. The legacy of the Obama presidency is being enshrined in the planned Obama Presidential Center on Chicago's Southeast Side near the University of Chicago campus. As a bastion of Trumpism, Lake Norman can be seen as a spatially-embodied reaction against Chicago politics, including its association with Obamas and the current African-American mayor, Lori Lightfoot, herself a target of Trump's insults.

But we argue that even if linked by the materiality of physical infrastructures (highways, airports), human migration, or rhetorical conflagrations which associate one place with or against another, all places are relationally-inscribed upon and within another, this being a condition of planetary urbanization that Lefebvrian arguments have long realized (e.g. Massey, 1993; Arboleda, 2016; Schmid 2018). In this case, we have found the "symbiotic" framework as advanced by DeVerteuil et al. (2020) particularly useful in weaving-together places through a relational connection. They (Ibid.) propose that the fact that two places are already relationally-connected to one-another is a pre-existing given; but, they suggest, this relationship can be mutualistic, parasitic, commensalistic or syncretic. We suggest our two sites/cases are

are mutualistically related - they both benefit from playing off each other, by framing themselves and (being framed) as the opposite of the other (even if they are not entirely).

At the much more mundane level of the everyday, our two cases share similarities which we will highlight in the following, through observations and anecdotes drawn from a mixed methodology of ethnographic site visits over a period from 2017-2020 (observation, walks, drives, interviews), discourse analysis of press, policies, and relevant case-specific literature and selected blogs and forums, and social media analyses, as part of separate and ongoing research projects, which both explore urban territory, space, social encounters, local politics, and representations of the urban offline/online. We take inspiration from geo-semiotic readings of place, following Scollon and Scollon (2003) and Gottdiener (1994) on "spatial semiotics" as affective/effective ways of reading the inter-relations between offline and online representations and discussions. Thus, we aim to follow from the social-ontological and "critical phenomenological" application of Lefebvrian-informed ethnography by Kinkaid (2020) with an eye toward embodiment and difference in everyday life through social interactions organized around specific sites. This lens informed how we activated our social ontology, using ethnographic observations and interactive activities (such as interviews), where we approached sites with an openness to a web of stories-yet-unfolding and spatial configurations taking new and potentially unforeseen forms.

## **V. Spaces of Social Encounters and Joy (The Oeuvre)**

Walking through South Shore's urban landscape, the neglect and disinvestment that the community's built environment has experienced since the 1970s becomes particularly visible along its former economic corridors, like 71<sup>st</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup> and 79<sup>th</sup> streets. Vacant store fronts

characterize them, only interrupted by several liquor stores, hairdressers, and occasionally, a café or restaurant (see figure 1).



*Figure 1: Vacant store on 71st street, South Shore (Authors' photograph, 03 May 2018)*

Community residents articulated in our conversations that the vacancy rate along these corridors is a major problem for the community, and that their priority is to refurbish them into new shopping opportunities. Yet, and despite the high vacancy rate, the few cafés and restaurants in South Shore are important urban sites for residents in their everyday life routines. During a conversation with a community resident who took one of us on a car ride through the community in November 2017, he emphasized the importance of cafés and restaurants in the community. For him, the community is:

a really good place to get vegan food. There's a vegan deli on 73<sup>rd</sup> [street and] Jeffrey [Boulevard], ...then there's [a] café over on Exchange, 72<sup>nd</sup> [street], ...and then there's a place across from that, they just opened, [...] that's, like, vegan soul food.

His response of listing all kinds of different restaurants and cafés in the community illustrates that, for him, everyday life takes place outside of one's home in the community, and that

meeting other community residents will likely take place in the few existing cafés and restaurants.

Our own research encounters both reflect and (re)produce this sense of community grounded in specific urban sites. Almost all our interviews took place in a handful of cafés and restaurants in the community. During these encounters, community members said that they value these sites as important spaces for everyday exchange with friends and neighbors. Lefebvre (1991, 143, original emphasis) writes that space is produced “in order to be *lived* by people with bodies and lives in their own particular urban context.” Community members embrace cafés and restaurants as urban sites where they can spend time and meet friends and neighbors.

One of these cafés is a *Starbucks* store on 71<sup>st</sup> street, which has been in the community since 2004. According to the property developer of this store, *McLaurin Development Partners*, it is one of the company’s most successful franchises in the city of Chicago.<sup>iv</sup> During one of our research visits to the *Starbucks*, a community member noted that “this place has helped to bring people from different parts of the community together.” For him, ever since the store opened, it has become one of the most important places for community residents to meet. Cafés like *Starbucks* comprise urban sites which are important to community residents in South Shore because they provide social spaces for interaction, encounter, and enjoyment. For Lefebvre (2014, 152), a space of enjoyment needs to be “a genuine space, one of moments, encounters, friendships, festivals, rest, quiet, joy, exaltation, love.” The *Starbucks* store becomes an urban site where bodily encounters and social relationships among South Shore’s population unfold. Such mundane everyday life activities as meeting a friend in a café are valued by people living in otherwise highly marginalized and stigmatized communities, where outsiders barely hear anything else about the community than stories of violence and crime (Schwarze, 2021).

The thirst for such spaces of encounter in South Shore is evident from the way that private and semi-private spaces erupt, suddenly, into joyful gatherings. Residents in South Shore, Chicago described social interactions in community spaces as the “social fabric” of the community. As one resident stated: “The social fabric is very important to how we deal with each other socially. When we visit each other it’s lots of food, it’s lot of love, it’s lot of music, art. It’s really beautiful.” Particularly during the summertime, barbeques and outdoor activities in front of residents’ homes and in their backyards are common urban sites, too, where the social fabric of the community operates. One community resident described her experiences with the social fabric:

For my particular block, people are really very friendly. Like last year, we were at the end of the summer, I was just standing in my yard and talking to my neighbor who we share a driveway. Then a couple of other neighbors came across the street and then more neighbors came down. And we’re just standing there in the driveway talking in the street.

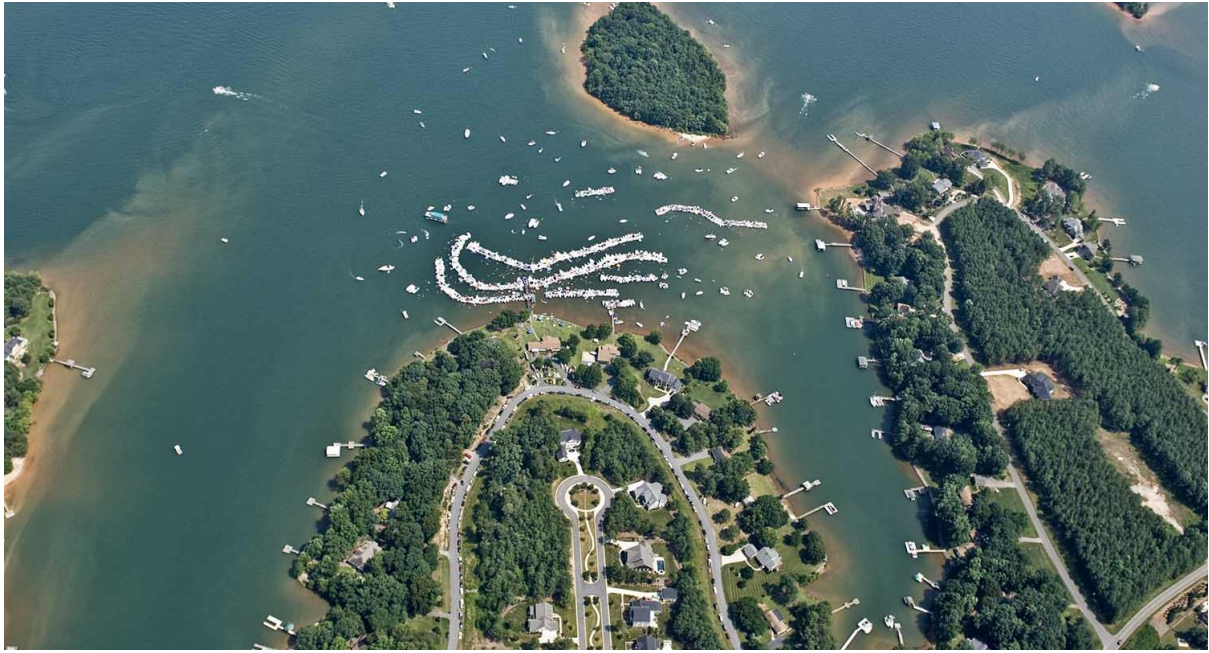
Later in our conversation, she recounted how she supported her new neighbors with settling into the neighborhood by telling them that barbeques particularly take place in the houses’ backyards to avoid having the smoke and smell from the barbeque across the entire street, emphasizing that the social fabric also encompasses informing newcomers to the community about certain “codes of neighborly behavior” – to paraphrase Anderson (1999). Private barbeques comprise important social spaces for community residents to live out their ideas of what makes a livable and supportive community. Barbeques bring the community together, celebrating, as one community resident put it, “the social cohesion for those of who are here” in the community. The tradition of barbeque and preparing food more generally has become such an important lived experience for the community that some residents decided to found a charity which celebrates cooking and barbeques in Black communities. Real Men Cook<sup>v</sup> is a charity that celebrates Fathers’ Day in the United States by emphasizing the importance of

fathers and father-figures involved in cooking and the provision of fresh food to their communities. Further, as one of the founders stated to us, it aims at defying the negative image of Black men in media representations as uninvolved in community and family affairs.

In Chicago's South Shore, emphasizing the existence of urban sites of social and cultural exchange, such as cafés and restaurants, needs to be contextualized into broader attempts by community residents to dispel the myth that everyday life in the area is merely the experience of violence and crime. As one community resident stated: “we need to tell our own community that’s there’s a lot of good here” and that “it’s up to the community to tell those good stories.” One “good story” heard repetitively during research visits to South Shore was the experience of social cohesion and interaction with other residents in urban sites such as private barbeques or cafés. Social networks among residents are strongly valued because they create social bonding and a shared sense of place attachment to their community. Massey (1993, 66) argues that “[t]he uniqueness of a place [...] is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings”, and that, therefore, places “can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings.” Such “moments” of daily social interactions and communications are of great importance to residents.

We venture now to Lake Norman, in the North Carolina exurbs. "Cocktail Cove", one particular corner of the lake, straddles the Mecklenburg / Iredell County Lines (Figure 2 below).





*Figure 2: Living large: Aerial view of exurban geographies, Lake Norman, Trump National Golf Club, Charlotte, from Google Earth (Accessed 18 October 2021).*

Driving around the area reveals a surrounding landscape of primarily large homes and homesites, with roads converging on wide highways such as US Interstate 77, a primary North/South corridor. Apartment communities, denser residential developments with smaller homes, and elder-care communities cluster closer to the main roads and interchanges. Towns like Mooresville that only decades ago were quiet rural crossroads, now sprawl with traffic-choked arterial roads. On our research drives, we passed gates and walls at the entrances of residential communities; upturned red-clay of construction sites; shopping centers; low-rise office and industrial parks; and still, patches of undisturbed forest and rural farmland.

By 'observing' "Cocktail Cove" and environs on social media over the past couple years, information has been revealed about how the site itself is used, practiced, discussed, enjoyed. But we also learned about some of the broader daily habits and activities of the users, beyond the lake cove. Through viewing the socio-spatial activity of the lake via #hashtags, images, comments and likes; 'check-ins' and posts, we have been able to connect other sites (and

activities) of daily life for the sample group. Prominent sites include restaurants and cafés (including *Starbucks*, present at nearly every highway exit); gyms and churches; and most of all, private spaces like backyards. The lake itself forms a serpentine (semi-)public common, connecting these sites and practices via its watery tongues, coves, islets; a mediator and bridge between publics and private.

The meaningful and significant sites of public gathering and social encounter then, beyond the lake itself, are liminal nodes of everyday life, or spatial practice (Lefebvre, 1991) like shopping centers, “mega churches” (the area contains several), and the chain gyms and fitness centers that have become common anchor tenants in retail complexes (e.g., *Planet Fitness*, *Gold’s Gym*; *Anytime Fitness*). Research drives around the area revealed a landscape where such sites are ubiquitous, repeating in different forms at each highway interchange driving north from Charlotte toward Statesville, on Interstate-77. Still, the gyms we observed were full of people; mega-church’s parking lots were overflowing on Sundays; and on summer Saturdays, “Cocktail Cove” is filled to the brim with hundreds of floating drinkers, swimmers, and lovers. If there is a central public square in this fragmented landscape, “Cocktail Cove” is the closest approximation.

While our research visits did not allow physical access to the summer flotillas (given timing and lack of access to a boat), we can see the vibrancy of these gatherings via social media analysis, where #cocktailcove, or the location geo-tag “Cocktail Cove, Lake Norman”, reveals quite a party, indeed. “Cocktail Cove” comes to life in a material sense on summer weekends, with assemblages of water, bodies, boats, booze and selfies. There are very few photos where people are not smiling. In its watery decadence, “Cocktail Cove” brings, and is produced by, collective joy; an oeuvre of margaritas and jet skis.

It is also a politically-charged space, especially on occasions such as the pro-Donald Trump boat parade (which occurred on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2020). Images and comments are peppered with frequent political signposting (e.g., “Trump 2020” banners or beach towels, “MAGA hats”, or the “Don’t Tread on Me” Gadsden flags, popular with right-libertarians). A significant number of the photos have patriotic imagery, like American flags. Several photos have Trump propaganda deliberately displayed in the foreground (even after his 2020 election loss). Other times, they are simply backdrops of the image. This is also a markedly white space. Most – perhaps eight out of ten - faces displayed in the images are white faces. But most photos uploaded and geo-tagged with “Cocktail Cove, Lake Norman” are not explicitly (P)olitical: they are predominantly 'selfies' of individuals or groups smiling on watercrafts, or floating in the water, drink in hand. If there is a central motif unifying the photos, it is how happy people seem to be, floating on the lake.

All these bits and pieces – water, boat and flag, body and booze; phone, image and #hashtag, combine into an affective environment of “exurb”. Practices, performances, and representations of place, body, objects, politics and subjectivities form a geo-semiotic web (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). Even if not necessarily outwardly political, the space is laden with political potential. Exploring exurban landscapes through “feelings, affects, processes, performances and ongoing interventions and fluctuations in the balance of power across space” can help to reveal the “the workings of geopolitics as an embodied experience” (Miller and Del Casino, 2020, 5).

## VI. Spaces of Divergence and Stigma (Representations)

Although ever-present to residents of South Shore in their everyday life routines and practices, the joyful daily practices in local spaces (including Starbucks) are barely talked about outside the community. Instead, media reports on the community are dominated by breaking news stories and viral headlines about shootings and gang violence. Loic Wacquant's (2008, 238) observation from the early 1990s that Chicago's South Side is portrayed as a vortex and vector of social disintegration, "in which violence, vice and dereliction are the order of things", remains relevant in today's public representations of the South Side (Schwarze, 2021). Beyond the city limits, too, Chicago's South Side is portrayed as a poor, undeserved, and violent urban space, a characterization yelled through the megaphone of Trump's rhetoric and Twitter feed.

As Neel (2018, 79, 86) argues, "Trump's most politically active base was in wealthier exurbs", and that "the far right is currently based in the hinterland's white exurbs, finding in these neighborhoods a pragmatic border between the poverty of the far-hinterland (rural) and the predatory flow of income drawn from the city and the near hinterland (inner suburbs)." Indeed, Lake Norman (in Iredell County) is frequently represented (and constructed) as a reactionary space *against* portrayed urban issues, challenges and perceived failures, especially vis the Democrat-leaning, racially-diverse, urbanized county to its south. For example, Iredell County leaders voted 5-0 against participating in Charlotte-Mecklenburg's commuter rail system in 2012, effectively killing the project (Lowrey, 2012). This has made the county and its residents a frequent target of scorn from pro-transit Charlotteans. One interview participant we encountered in Charlotte (in 2019) had this to say about Lake Norman residents, when asked about local politics:

They spend all their time at NASCAR races and all their money on mansions. They don't really care about [local issues] that matter.

The Urban Dictionary ([urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com)), a crowd-sourced alternative “Wiki” dictionary characterized by slang and raw, satirical, and sometimes jarring portrayals of local places – features the following dialogue as part of the “most popular definition” for Lake Norman:

Guy one: Hey man you tryna go swim in Lake Norman?  
Guy two: Nah I’m good I’m not tryna get cancer bro.  
([Urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com), accessed 29 January 2021).

The reference to “cancer” hints to a darker reality, and to an unfolding and possibly significant environmental and public health crisis in and around the lake. The lake is home to a nuclear power plant (the McGuire Station), and previously, has been the site of the dumping of coal-ash by Duke Energy Corporation, which constructed and manages the lake and upstream/downstream rivers. Researchers are investigating a possible cancer cluster in the area: cases of a rare form of thyroid cancer seem to be concentrated in the neighborhoods adjacent to the lake (near “Cocktail Cove”). Speculation that the cancer is linked to the coal power plants upstream from the lake, or previous dumping of toxins, or the nuclear plant, has led to an ongoing investigation and several features in national media (Emmet, 2020).

But the stigmatization goes both ways. The perceived quality of Iredell’s public schools is often a selling-point for families choosing to relocate there, versus across the county line, discussed on popular public relocation web-discussion boards like “City-Data.com”.<sup>vi</sup> Comments there include statements such as, *“I would stay out of Mecklenburg [County]. The taxes are high and the schools are horrible.”* What lies beneath this rhetoric of “good” exurban versus “poor” urban schools are coded racial signposts and dog-whistles. According to the 2020-2021 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools’ Diversity Report, the district was 25.8 percent non-Hispanic white.<sup>vii</sup> Iredell County Schools, in comparison, is around two-thirds non-Hispanic white.<sup>viii</sup> We talked to a new resident of the “Cocktail Cove” area who relocated from a more inner-

urban area partly because, in their words, “there were too many liberals there. I didn’t want my kids to have to be told they needed to feel bad about being American, or being white, in school.”

Stigmatization therefore operates in and shapes both of our sites in territorial and spatial ways. Chicago’s South Shore is territorially stigmatized as a violent “Black ghetto” space where outsiders barely learn anything else than news about shootings. “Cocktail Cove”, too, is stigmatized as a Trumpian hinterland which, at the same time, also reproduces stigma towards neighboring counties which are associated with Democratic urban strongholds. Again, this is not to suggest that the lived experience of stigma is the same in both spaces. In contrast to exurban “Cocktail Cove”, the political economy of territorial stigma in South Shore Chicago has certainly contributed to extreme forms of economic disinvestment over decades, depriving the community of such basic needs as fresh groceries and employment opportunities (Schwarze, 2021). Yet, stigma forms part of the production of space in both sites and, as the next section shows, also becomes manifest through physical and environmental neglect and hazards.

If one manages to escape the narrow and essentializing framing of Chicago’s South Shore as homogenously violent and gang-affected, as often promoted through media imaginaries (Schwarze, 2021), as well as exurban “Cocktail Cove” as a radical-right, Trumpian stronghold, and engages with the lived everyday experiences of people who call these spaces their home, it becomes possible to see the everyday as an assemblage of socio-cultural and political expressions and activities that are not that different. This is not to ignore that both spaces are, in many ways, fundamentally different with regards to, for example, the experiences of racism and discrimination which continue to shape and adversely affect Chicago’s South Side communities (see next section). Further, not every resident in South Shore might support the

opening of a *Starbucks* store, considering its reputation as a notoriously divisive coffee chain that, for the sake of increasing profit margins, strategically mobilizes its image as a diverse, open, tolerant, equality-supporting, and allegedly colorblind company, and whose core audience are normally upper-middle class whites (Simon, 2010). But for those residents who talked to us about the store in South Shore, it mainly comprises a social space to socialize outside of their home regardless of the legacy of the company associated with white and gentrifying spaces. The socializing quality of such spaces in both South Shore and exurban North Carolina, foreground that, despite their insurmountable and visible differences, comparative analyses offer insights into the commonalities of everyday life across different and separated spaces.

## **VII. Spaces of Connection (and Political Transformation)**

A large manmade lake north of Charlotte that has over 500 miles of shoreline. Often under public eye with testing contamination levels from Duke Energy. However, the threat of highly toxic waste within the lake doesn't stop locals from bathing and swimming within the murky waters. Often parties are held on islands where many get shitfaced in the pisswarm waters in the summer (Theurbandictionary.com, "most popular definition" of Lake Norman, accessed 21 January 2021).

That a politically-conservative, majority-white exurb would also be a place of environmental toxicity is a pattern that Hochschild (2016) also observed in Louisiana's "cancer alley" (and can be seen in many other conservative-voting geographies nationally, from areas of higher Covid-19 rates to poorest air quality); an embodied and lived form of daily territorial stigmatization and hazard. In Chicago, ongoing political struggle over the relocation of a metal shredder facility from a wealthy and predominantly white North Side to a predominantly Latinx community on Chicago's Southeast Side has spurred intense political protests and mobilization, both offline and online, including a hunger strike by a group of Southeast Side

residents who view this relocation as another moment of environmental racism and favoritism of white and wealthy neighborhoods in Chicago (Chicago Tribune, 2018).

We suggest that both sides of our analysis are relationally intertwined in multiple and complex ways, one of which being their shared experience of environmental injustice. This interconnectedness, however, does not simply result from spatial relationality under global capitalism where, inevitably, spaces across the globe are connected with each other in one or the other way. Rather, and following DeVerteuil et al's (2020) "symbiotic approach" to link the relationality of divergent spaces, we return to our suggestion in this section that our two sides are mutualistically interconnected; that is, they share "a two-way relationship in which both sides benefit" from their interconnection (DeVerteuil et al, 2020, 922). This two-way relationship is 'beneficial' insofar as both benefit from playing off each other, by framing themselves as the opposite of the other whilst simultaneously sharing similar experiences.

In a first instance of mutualistic relationship, the experience of environmental justice/injustice, we suggest, may form the basis for solidarity and the formation of alliances and coalitions that may, if given space and support, unite across racial, class, and political divisions. It could become, following DeVerteuil et al. (2020, 923, original emphasis), "a mutualistic *panacea*" for both sites to find solidarity in the shared experience of environmental injustice, thereby bridging their social and racial divide and "producing a range of commensal and mutualistic relationships" (DeVerteuil et al., 2020, 927) between them. Trapenberg-Frick (2021) illustrates how environmental concerns can bring together normally antagonistic groups around specific causes, such as the "Green Tea Coalition" in Georgia, where anti-tax "Tea Party" exurbanites and progressive environmental conservationists joined forces to defeat development projects outside of Atlanta. Such coalitions and alliances, we suggest, offer hints for further solidarities.



A second point of connection and mutualistic relationship (DeVerteuil et al., 2020) between our cases, we suggest, is the desire for, and the re-claiming of, public space, across both urban and exurban landscapes that have been striated and enclosed by private uses and different forms of walls, barriers, gates. Lefebvre (1996) argued that the “oeuvre” of the city – the co-produced artwork of everyday life – is not possible without access to public space, without the ability to make and re-make public space. In a paradigm where public space is increasingly privatized and traditional public space is disappearing from urban life, publics seek to reclaim, re-appropriate and re-animate the *oeuvre* in semi-public spaces like *Starbucks* stores, backyards, front stoops, lake coves, and the multitude of hybridized spaces in-between. If denied such space, they will produce it.

The sites and places of public gathering and encounter are limited in exurban landscapes like Lake Norman, but the lake itself presents one such public commons (even though, technically, it is owned and operated by the Duke Energy Corporation). Other sites are aggressively private, like the confines of the Trump Golf Club itself. “Cocktail Cove”, therefore, is a sort of public-private hybrid, emblematic of the complicated blurring of public and private space that are so common across neoliberalized urban landscapes (Luger and Lees, 2020). The winding residential roads demarcate layers-within-layers of privacy, and many of the residential subdivisions are gated (with some homes also behind another barrier of gates). It is a landscape engineered around the car, the truck, and (on the lake), boats. As such, it typifies the American exurban belt’s morphology, as summarized compellingly by Neel (2018, 103):

driving from one place to another (in the exurb) means navigating airport freight roads, weaving through mazes of cargo trucks, winding across labyrinths of warehouses and factories. These are spaces built at the scale of capital, rather than people. There is no hipster nostalgia for ‘walkability’ here – many suburbs even lack complete sidewalk systems – and going anywhere is synonymous with driving there. [...] This creates a different atmosphere of life, changing the way your body seems to move through space.

In Lake Norman, the shared desire for access to public space animates “Cocktail Cove” into a social and political public artwork; it transforms gyms and retail shops into festive social gatherings; and it gives special significance to the public-potentiality and intimacy that a large church offers, despite none of these sites being traditional public places. Neel (2018) suggests that the exurban belt has tremendous potential for political (and class) solidarities, even a revolutionary potential, but one that is not realized because of a dispersed and fragmented landscape which makes communality difficult. Neel muses that in the exurbs, “class appears to dissolve in isolation. How many people, really, do we talk to in a given day? We talk to co-workers, customers, maybe crowds, depending on the job. [...] You get home somehow in the darkness,” (Neel, 2018, 230). Sites like the lake cove, gym, church, take on such a public role because they facilitate something that is otherwise missing.

Returning to Lefebvre’s contradictory framing of, on the one hand, the homogenizing urbanization of global capitalism, but on the other hand, the tendency toward the production of dispersed, fragmented and individualized urban spaces, he asks, “how and why is it that the advent of a world market, implying a degree of unity at the level of the planet, gives rise to a fractioning of space?” (Lefebvre, 1991, 351). Though the exurban landscape of Lake Norman is entrapped in global economic flows, we suggest it is chopped up, gated and segmented due to the uniquely American system of local laws, municipal and political borders and boundaries; large-scale private land-ownership and control of natural and built infrastructures (including the lake and water basin); and the extant, specific, racial and class histories of this Southern-American region. As Luger (2017) argues, of all U.S. regions, the South is the most trapped (currently) in its historical socio-spatial formations and patterns of segregation, resulting in a lack of commons and spaces for class solidarity.

So, we conclude by asking, what would such a commons look like, one capable of generating momentum for solidarity and a shared desire for a right to the city, spanning not only across diffuse, segregated landscapes, but between urban and its peripheries? To this point, we now advance some proposals for how to reconcile the seemingly foreign cultural and political languages of urban and exurban and perhaps, stimulate movement toward a broader site-based, social ontology.

### **VIII. Conclusion: Animating the Political, Re-Centering the Center**

Exploring the idiosyncrasies of daily life and the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) across both urban and exurban geographies reveals commonality (as well as difference) and brings into view Hochschild's (2016) “empathy wall” as steadfast and fixed, but also, porous and dynamic. We argue that empathy may not be possible or even desirable: it is not a panacea, and dialogue is a starting point, rather than an end. Crossing points and potential solidarities – the faint outlines of emergent coalitions and alliances – may exist in relation to specific sites and everyday practices, but also, attached to specific issues and demands (e.g., environmental justice, public health, access to public space, the taking of, making of, new urban commons). A fragmented and exploded urban geography necessitates new formations of public space and with that, new political possibilities and transformations. As Arboleda (2016, 107) notes,

in so far as urbanization implies a multiscalar process of production and reproduction of the built environment in which global structures of capital and everyday practices become interlinked, these operational landscapes [...] besides fostering marginalization and dispossession - also provide new centralities and opportunities for encounter between previously isolated communities or individuals.

However, we do *not* mean to suggest that our two cases are alike. This is important because our intention is not to simplify the complexity of everyday life in both spaces by merely

identifying commonalities between them. The experiences of racism and racist segregation (Shabazz, 2015), the penal wing of the state (Alexander, 2010), public housing transformation (Chaskin and Joseph, 2015), or a Trumpian rhetoric of hate, are particularly felt in Black communities in America (and we suggest such rhetoric will long outlive the Trump presidency itself). Yet, beneath these socio-structural, economic, and political differences and inequalities are everyday similarities and mutualistic relationships (DeVerteuil et al., 2020) which are often hidden, unidentified, and unidentifiable because of the ways in which we perceive, conceive and envision each other. Deciphering these mutualistic relationships and identifying commonalities and shared experiences between seemingly divergent sites and spaces can, we believe, only be positive for both insofar as it allows for the emergence of new symbiotic relationalities with the possibility for political change.

Thus, maintaining urban and exurban as distinct frames inhabiting disjointed discussions may obscure the identification of important differences *and* commonalities within them, and the heterogeneity of everyday life in specific sites. After all, “urban” is not a monolith, nor is “exurb”. Both contain myriad struggles, striations, affective experiences and spatial morphologies and textures.

So, then, where are the possibilities for an urban/exurban (re)volution? Lefebvre (1991, 52) argues that “space carries properties which are simultaneously open to transformation, just as much as they are sedimented”. Ahmed (2006, 24) echoes this point, noting that “[i]ndeed, to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering”, making new forms of social practice visible. We suggest that what may seem like mundane sites and spaces of everyday life - the café, the backyard barbeque, the church, or the gym - are actually powerful new centers which reflect the fragmented and exploded nature of

extended urbanization. Daily life is forming around new centers that have yet to join ontologically, politically, or culturally across spaces, but have the potential to do so, if a language of urbanism develops which can transcend redundant spatial, racial, and political boundaries and borders. Mutualistic relationships and the identification of similarities and ways to benefit from each other (DeVerteuil et al., 2020), we suggest, could be a way forward in bridging and closing the spatial divide between the urban and exurban.

This may seem insurmountable in the contemporary United States, but as Arboleda (2016:107) notes, patterns of solidarity are emerging in other parts of the world: “New forms of solidarity between local communities and international advocacy networks have emerged, linking operational landscapes and large urban agglomerations in mutually transformative ways”. Arboleda hints at, to use one example, the way that South American labor movements might find ways to upscale and form lateral networks to effectively challenge and re-direct exploitative capital flows. We echo this possibility, and by ontologically joining urban and exurban around shared demands for sociality, joy, public space and environmental justice, we propose that the exciting potential for such solidarities may yet be realized.

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