'The Edge of the Island': Neighborhood Identity and Evolving Community in 'Liminal Places'

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The Edge of the Island

Neighborhood Identity and Evolving Communities in ‘Liminal Places’

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Abstract:

This paper examines the contemporary processes at work in urban areas without clear spatial identities that are simultaneously facing the challenges of cultural change and gentrification. I do so through the close analysis of one such ‘liminal place’ on Chicago’s West Side. I use the phrase ‘community on the edge of the island’ to describe the area, inspired by an interviewee who referred to the tenuous search for a sort of ideal bohemian hipness as the need to stay as “close to the edge of the island” as possible without actually leaving it. Making use of ethnographic and geographic field work in the area, the study examines how neighborhood identity is imagined, projected and negotiated by different actors, and the role of socio-economic processes as well as spatial histories and mythologies in these processes. First, I discuss the idea of a place without a name and introduce the area that I call Edgetown. This is followed by a more detailed analysis of the transitional nature of the area, leading in turn to the core discussion of the communities that are to be found there and the specific time and space that make the “the edge of the island” such a revealing subject for understanding neighborhood change in Chicago today. I conclude with a discussion of whether this “edge” may be a more rigid one due to a combination of historical and contemporary socio-economic processes.
The Edge of the Island
Neighborhood Identity and Evolving Community in Liminal Places

A curious phenomenon in major cities is to come across an urban area – a “neighborhood,” a “community”? – without a clear identity. Some are ambiguous border areas, others random patches of city with little to define them, and then there are those in the process of creating identities, so new (or so contested, or so forgotten) that they are not currently established. The latter, in particular, may often overlap with a second socio-spatial urban phenomenon, what we might call early-stage or fringe gentrification (see Ley, 1994). Combined, these liminal places invite questions about how communities decline, persist, interact and change, and how urban development processes can shape our understanding of local identity and vice versa. So-called “zones in transition” have been a focus of urban sociology since the earliest writing of the Chicago School, yet are also of great concern to critical political-economic perspectives and contemporary work on migration, gentrification, and scenes of consumption. This paper examines such a place, with a focus on how neighborhood identity is imagined, projected and negotiated by different people there, and what it says about historical and contemporary socio-economic processes that this particular time and space is not only the “edge” of hip gentrification in Chicago today, but perhaps a more permanent edge than previous ones.

Field Site and Methods

Having set out initially simply to study an area both rapidly changing and without clear identity, I defined my ideal field site as being an area that straddles borders physically and culturally, on the edge between more distinct neighborhoods, and itself currently changing due to gentrification and migration. In other words, a neighborhood in transition socially and economically that is also not clearly spatially understood but has
the potential to become so. There are multiple areas in Chicago that could fit this
description, but it was at the corner of California and Chicago Avenues on the city’s West
Side that I found the area that I came to refer to in my field notes first as ‘West West
Town’ and then, just as often, as ‘Edgetown.’

Edgetown is located in the western edge of the West Town community area
(overlapping slightly with the Humboldt Park community area), 3.75 miles due west of
the heart of Chicago’s Magnificent Mile. It lies just north of the Kinzie Industrial
Corridor and Metra commuter rail tracks, half a mile southeast of Humboldt Park (the
park), and about a mile and a half southwest of the trendy “six corners” area of Wicker
Park. While most of the study area is technically within the West Town community area
it is beyond what many people think of as such, on the edge of Humboldt Park, Ukrainian
Village, a small residential area called Smith Park, and the heavily industrial stretch
along Grand and Sacramento Avenues that serves as a clearer community boundary
between this and a more distinct greater West Side beyond (see area map, Appendix A).

Throughout this study, I make reference to information gathered during field work
in the area in spring and summer of 2009. (For space and presentation reasons, some
maps and other appendices are excluded, but are available by request.) In addition to a
detailed land-use survey, I conducted semi-formal interviews with a variety of local
characters – business owners and service workers, a city alderman, the unemployed – as
well as the countless conversations and observations in my field notes. Direct quotes
come from recorded interviews; ellipses and insertions in brackets “[…]” represent my
edits. In what follows, I turn to my field work in the area and a review of relevant
sociological literature to get to the bottom of this seemingly anonymous neighborhood in
transition, the place it is becoming, and why it could wind up being a more fixed “edge”
than some of its precursors. First, I discuss the idea of a place without a name and further
introduce the area with a brief demographic and spatial description and some preliminary conclusions about how the neighborhood actually is identified.

A Place without a Name?

Chicago is famously a “city of neighborhoods,” not only because it has so many of them, but because they are generally so culturally distinctive, officially recognized, and even quite explicitly defined. Perhaps most importantly, these fairly precise neighborhood identities are also strongly understood by residents of the city themselves (see, e.g., Hunter, 1974). Of course any “lack of identity” in Edgetown is relative and certainly socially constructed: if people live, work or play here, there are surely forms of identification, even if only major streets or intersections that serve as points of reference for people describing it (Hunter, 1974). But the lack of clarity on the subject among the wide variety of people I spoke to in the neighborhood is striking. One resident, a street artist known as Blütt, described it as “kind of that grey area between Ukrainian Village and Humboldt Park.” The tattoo-faced head cook at Feed, a trendy “home style” restaurant at California and Chicago, admitted “I don’t know… West Town I guess, or Humboldt Park?” And Tony, a teacher in his mid-20s who has just recently moved to this stretch of Chicago Ave., said simply, “It doesn’t really have an identity.”

J, a young coffee roaster and the owner of the Star Lounge coffee bar, knows the history and character of the area more than most I spoke with, but even he is not sure what to call it. He is the first (of what will eventually become many) to tell me that “This strip of area on Chicago Avenue from Western to California was called ‘The Patch,’” a name that seems to come from the time when the area was an Italian enclave and apparently refers to a city dump that stood on the land that is now Smith Park, though J says it is mostly “the old school neighborhood” that uses this name. But as he puts it, “they’ll call it West Town, they’ll call it Ukrainian Village, but properly on a map it’s
Humboldt Park.” Or is it? Realtors are usually in-the-know about neighborhood identity, in part because they are frequently responsible for manufacturing it (see Kasinitz, 1988; von Hassel, 1998; Mele, 2000), but in this case even different realty neighborhood maps offer different opinions (for example, Dream Town Realty’s map places the area north of Chicago Ave. in Humboldt Park, south of it in East Garfield Park, and east of Western in Ukrainian Village, while the famous “Big Stick” map endorsed by the Chicago Association of Realtors puts Smith Park and all other points south of Chicago Ave. in West Town). Erin, a realtor at a local agency in the heart of the study area, was even vexed by the question: “I don’t know, guess we might call it Ukrainian Village, but it’s a little far west for that […] and there’s an area, but it’s not really – calling it Smith Park might be a stretch.” She concludes that they would likely call it West Town or Ukrainian Village (or if it was far west enough, it would be Humboldt Park), but concedes that what the area is called is “a good question.”

The takeaway from all this is that there is no real consensus, whether among cartographers, realtors or neighborhood residents. The closest thing to a unique name for the area that I heard among residents is The Patch, an intriguingly noir-ish moniker and perhaps a catchier one than my Edgetown. Most written accounts seem to identify The Patch only as synonymous with Smith Park, leaving in doubt whether it can describe the area on Chicago Ave. itself (let alone north of it).

So what does it mean to have an area without clear identity facing cultural change? What characteristics might contribute to this situation, and what processes can we observe? First, Edgetown is a border area. It lies right on the boundary between two formal community areas, between several well-established neighborhoods (Ukrainian Village, Smith Park, Humboldt Park) and on the quite visible edge between a primarily residential and commercial area and an established industrial and rail corridor. Edgetown is even split down the middle by the boundaries of two of Chicago’s aldermanic districts.
This means that even as a potentially unified commercial area along Chicago Ave. emerges, residents, businesses, or workers on one side of the street may occasionally face unique advantages or obstacles.²

Second, the area has little to define it physically. For example, the sort of ethnic cultural institutions that help give neighboring Ukrainian Village its identity are entirely east of Western Ave., with the exception of one relatively new café. Smith Park, which gives name to the small residential area around it, does not successfully do the same for the main drag on Chicago Ave. (as, by contrast, Logan Square does for an area well beyond its modest grounds). Nor does Edgetown have a transit station, another institution with identity-giving potential (Douglas, 2010). The built environment of the area is fairly unremarkable, save the surprising preponderance of new (and largely under-occupied) condominium and mixed-use developments. The most notable local institutions for most of those I spoke to are a few quiet bars and restaurants, and a “coffee bar” named Star Lounge that has become something of an informal community center, if not one currently likely to inspire identity for the neighborhood on its own.

Third, Edgetown is demographically a classic “zone of transition” (Park and Burgess, [1925] 1968). Typical of Chicago’s inner West Side neighborhoods, the area has a quiet history as an immigrant community and parts of it have been notable enclaves of Ukrainian, Russian, Italian, and Latino populations. In recent decades, the area has seen cultural and economic shifts, first with increasing numbers of Latinos and, now, the early stages of ‘hip’ middle-class gentrification, including an influx of youthful, predominantly (if certainly not exclusively) white artists, students, and other ‘neo-bohemians’ (Lloyd, 2006), in addition to some small number of more traditional middle-class professionals. Older community identities remain, but are not very widely known, while new identities are, I argue, being imagined and shaped today. The next section examines this third component of the liminal place of Edgetown in greater detail.
A Neighborhood in Transition

Edgetown has long been an area of immigration. German immigrants were the first to settle the area that is now Ukrainian Village beginning in the late 1800s, followed by Poles, Jews, Italians, and of course Ukrainians (Essig, 2005). The Patch in particular was first settled by Sicilian immigrants moving up from the Grand Avenue area. Beginning after World War Two, West Town joined Chicago’s Near West and Lower West Sides as a primary destination for Latino immigrants, especially Puerto Ricans in Wicker Park and Humboldt Park, and Mexicans in Ukrainian Village (Essig, 2005). African Americans came to increasingly inhabit the areas to the southwest, nearer Garfield Park (Badillo, 2005; Seligman, 2005). All of these new arrivals did not necessarily mean integration, especially in an enclave like The Patch. Indeed, long-time area resident Ernie remembered that in his youth that area “was a closed neighborhood […] because it was such a heavy Italian neighborhood, right here, they wouldn’t let blacks in here. [His brother-in-law, like Ernie a Latino] would come out here to play basketball, Latinos would get chased out. Um, and if you were Black, you’d get beat up.” José, proprietor of a taquería at Chicago and Grand, tells a related story of how an elderly Black man had stuck his head into the taco shop a few years ago and asked if he was welcome, explaining that there had once been a “big ass sign that said ‘whites only’” on the building (well before it became a Mexican restaurant of course).

The narrative today, however, is one of inclusion and openness. Of the formerly dominant Italian community, J says “they’ve learned to live with the Ukrainians, with the Puerto Ricans, and not a lot of contention about it;” he describes the neighborhood as “a real mix” of people. One of the area’s aldermen, Manuel Flores, likewise describes “a much more diverse group in terms of ethnicity.” And in contrast to the racism Ernie remembers of Smith Park in the past, “now, you know, you see every nationality” in the park, he says. My observations of the neighborhood back up the assertion that there is a
fairly high level of diversity in the area: one sees many whites, Latinos and African Americans on the street, and both whites and Latinos appear to be home owners in the residential areas north and south of Chicago Ave. But another aspect of Ernie’s description of the park today is also important: “they kind of just hang out in different parts of the park.” Indeed, of the study area more generally, he says it has become “much more inclusionary I think, with a feeling that there are separate groups in here.” While more diverse overall and possibly less “closed” on a block-by-block basis, census data show that West Town as a whole is still quite segregated into majority white, Latino and Black areas (see map, Appendix B). The alderman even noted that “it still isn’t unheard of for you to see one- or two-block enclaves. And they’re very proud of those one or two blocks.”

Regardless, the real driving force behind the neighborhood in transition today is no longer immigration of the traditional sort. Rising property values and increasing land development, enterprise, and occupation by higher-income or otherwise primarily white and non-immigrant populations (and the accompanying displacement of previous groups) has been the story across much of Chicago’s North, Near West and Northwest Sides for decades (see Lloyd, 2006). Though the white population in the West Town community area had declined significantly to just over 50 percent of the total population by 1990, in the following decade it rose to gain another seven percent; the proportion of the area identifying as Hispanic or Latino declined during the same period from 62 percent to 47 percent of the total population (a decline of some 15,000 people, fairly startling for what is otherwise a rapidly growing demographic group; see Essig, 2005).

Up-to-date statistics are not available for the Edgetown area itself, but it is clear that the neighborhood is now at one front of what has been a centrifugal march out from the center at Wicker Park’s “six points” area. Beginning there and on the Division St. corridor between Ashland and Damen in the late 1980s, a patterned progression – from
edgy artist colonization with ‘underground’ galleries and venues, to increasingly hip music and art scenes, then full-blown trendy shopping and entertainment districts – can be traced east into Noble Square, northwest along Milwaukee Ave. through Bucktown and Logan Square, west toward Humboldt Park, and southeast into Ukrainian Village. In the past couple of years, the early signs of these processes have arrived in Edgetown. It is, thus, the type of place that I came to call a “community at the edge of the island,” a phrase borrowed from one of my interview subjects (see next section).

The changes that the neighborhood has seen (and continues to experience) are perhaps most plainly visible in the built environment itself, where gentrification’s westward march is clearly marked in land-use patterns. Traveling west along the stretch of Chicago Ave. from the Kennedy Expressway over about two miles towards the corner of California Ave., one gets a clear sense of a gradual but nonetheless distinctly increasing peripheralness. For the first mile or so this stretch is a bustling and eclectic dense urban neighborhood, with more of the same (or to an even greater degree of trendiness) north, east and south. But then, with each block west past Damen Ave., there are slightly fewer trendy stores, fewer hip galleries and coffee shops, fewer notable restaurants, fewer people on the streets or riding bicycles; past Western Ave., fewer signs even of the Ukrainian community, more auto shops, and more newly-built but under-occupied buildings. One of the most striking things to me on my first visit to the area was the number of brand new condominium and mixed-use structures along Chicago Ave., some empty, others seemingly inhabited but still waiting for retail occupants. To be clear though, the peripheralness I describe does not mean desolation: there are bars, the thriving coffee bar, Star Lounge, and various businesses old and new. The point is that one gets a distinct sense that this is exactly how far the vanguard of gentrification has reached. As one passes through the intersection of Chicago and California, one sees an entire block of condos so new that they are unoccupied or perhaps not even finished, and
the last westernmost sentinels of hipness in West Town: a late-license bar called the Continental and the trendy restaurant Feed. Neither has been open in its current form for more than three years. The edge is right there, at the western wall of the restaurant Feed: on one side, hip brunch spot; on the other, vacant lot (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The edge of the island – the restaurant Feed, just west of California Avenue on Chicago Avenue, the last vestige of hipness in Edgetown (west West Town), seen here with its neighboring vacant lot. Photo by the author.

Not surprisingly, the changes the neighborhood has experienced of late are on the minds of many people in the area. Blütt, who has lived in West Town for more than a decade and in the Edgetown area for five years, remembers when this stretch of Chicago Ave. mostly contained vacant lots and small factories or workshops – “Knocked that down, put up condos” he observes. José, of Taco el Jaliciense, remembers that “Ten years ago there was nothing here. Nothing.” He tells me about his memory of the first sign of gentrification appearing more than a mile to the east, near Ashland and Chicago:
“And I remember the first house […] it was right there on Chestnut… that was the first [new] house they started building around there. […] And that was kinda funny, because I’d never seen like a nice house in the area… Now it’s the oldest fucking house in the area!!” After that, he says, gesturing like a plane taking off along Chicago Ave. outside the taquería, “You can see everything, everything fucking new.” A simple comparison of land usage in the area over two decades confirms the degree to which new development has come to Edgetown (see land use maps, Appendix C).

But José also provides the perspective of those displaced by growth: “There was a lot of Hispanics right around there. They used to own the houses, but the taxes they went up, wow! I used to own a house, paying like $4,000 a year taxes, then like double, then $10,000… I sold the house.” Though his business has benefitted from all the growth (construction crews are a main lunchtime clientele for the taco stand), he does not feel a great benefit from new residents themselves. Alderman Flores is likewise concerned that gentrification has put pressure on families that have lived in the neighborhood for a long time, and worries that “if this goes off kilter you can end up with a community segregated by class or wealth. And then this can end up meaning it’s segregated by race.” For the time being though, Flores sees the growth as largely positive, particularly the “expanding commercial sector” and the “stability” (in terms of local organization and social capital, one assumes) that he feels it can bring.

Blütt, fatherly in demeanor despite his many tattoos, feels he has come to terms with the gentrification: “I don’t gripe too much about like new condo buildings stuff as much as I used to because you can’t stop it, you can’t really worry yourself sick about it. […] stuff is just gonna keep moving north and west in this town. And uh, I wouldn’t have moved to this neighborhood ten years ago, you know?” He continues along the lines of this second explanation, acknowledging the positive sides of gentrification: “It’s kinda nice to see things creeping west like to California. You know, you go down
Chicago there’s condo buildings, condo buildings, condo buildings, but if there weren’t condo buildings what would there be? Nothing; like this desolate strip of despair between here and California Avenue. So, it’s fine with me.” Ernie, who grew up nearby and now owns a home in Smith Park, is proud of all the little businesses he has watched “pop up” over the years since he moved in in the late 1990s when he too felt “there was nothing here;” these things make the neighborhood “convenient,” “livable,” and a place “where you can do a lot of walking.” To him, “there is change, but it’s positive change, not negative change.”

Positive or negative, change has come (as, arguably, it always has) to the Edgetown area. An interesting question that remains however is where or when the neighborhood really is at this edge of the gentrification process. Who are these ‘gentrifiers’ and what has brought them here, and what does this actually mean for the community or communities that will continue to define this liminal area?

**The Urban Ecology of Hip: Authenticity and Attraction to the Edge of the Island**

It is beyond the limitations here to construct a full definition of gentrification or the many stages of so-called bohemia or neo-bohemia beyond that offered by the examples described herein (but see Zukin, 1982, 1987; Ley, 1994; Lloyd, 2006, among others, for further discussion and analysis). I will emphasize here only that, in addition to the clearer motivations of working artists, real-estate speculators and property developers, the process is closely tied to the search for the undiscovered authenticity and edginess that is so central to bohemian and ‘hipster’ subcultures. Aaron, a 21 year-old Mexican-American barista at Star Lounge, encapsulated the whole process of hip gentrification in Chicago eloquently: “It’s like Jurassic Park. Wicker Park is the center of the island, and its where all the dinosaurs are, so you want to stay as close to the edge of the island as possible.” In other words, one would not want to be so far from the center of hip as to be
‘off the island,’ but as close to the edge as one can safely be; a sort of subcultural gravitational orbit of complementary centrifugal and centripetal forces. Such a perspective helps explain the attraction of lesser-known, liminal places like Edgetown.

Blütt puts it in even plainer terms, describing the neighborhood’s residents as “the kinda people that were in Wicker Park, well, ten years ago maybe? So that, you know, now none of us could even afford to live in Wicker Park, nor would we want to because of the way things have gone.” This moving toward the edge is also directly tied to a desire to be one of the first, privileged few who are in-the-know (this is, after all, the core meaning of ‘hip’ in the first place; see Leland, 2004). Ben, a 20 year-old artist who moved to an apartment (in one of the new mixed-use buildings) in the study area in late 2009, exemplifies this desire, and the hipster scene in general. “If you’re thinking about moving here, don’t tell anybody about it,” he implores me. “Yeah keep it quiet. The Italians kept it quiet for a long time. I like it here.”

Certainly these westernmost areas of West Town have not (yet) experienced the level of notoriety and trendiness that areas further north and east have. Indeed, on some counts, Edgetown still resembles the very earliest stages of gentrification as defined by the scholars of the subject mentioned above: it is not widely known or identifiable (even realtors are undecided on what to call it), what reputation it does have is not highly attractive (“I lived in Lakeview for three years,” says J, “and, you know, the things you hear about this neighborhood are hilarious, like ‘West of Western? You’ll get shot man, you gonna get raped and get murdered.’”), and rents are significantly lower on average than they are in Wicker Park. And many of the often-derided ‘hipsters’ in the area actually are seeking a less trendy, more affordable neighborhood in which to find work space, with more ‘traditional’ art practice still central for many I spoke to.

But just because the pursuit of the edge is an important part of the area’s attraction does not mean those seeking the edge are in any way preserving it. This is, of
course, a central paradox of this sort of gentrification, and something that Edgetown is quite symptomatic of. For one thing, the dozens of brand new glass and concrete developments are the type of investment one would expect to follow established neighborhood popularity. The area is home to a yoga studio, two acupuncturists (I heard two of residents of widely different backgrounds debating the merits of each), and a wine bar. While transcribing field notes on a ‘PC’ laptop at Star Lounge, I was once asked by a legitimately curious-looking patron why I was not using a Mac. And though there are not recent enough figures to confirm it today, Alderman Flores is confident that “the folks who are moving in tend to have higher levels of education and perhaps come from a higher income household.” And, as mentioned above, we can be quite confident that rents and property values in the area have substantially increased: Ernie, the Smith Park homeowner, told me that the townhouse he paid $250,000 for in 1999 was getting offers of $450,000 eight years later (before the housing downturn). J likewise complains, “I pay 875 in this neighborhood for a very tiny two-bedroom, and I should be paying like 600.”

Edgetown also shows modest signs of the beginnings of the lifestyle-centered industry of hip cultural tourism described by Lloyd (2006: 126). The California Clipper, for example, is an increasingly popular ‘hip dive’ bar, at which I attended a party for a young woman and her friends (many of the more ‘yuppy’ than ‘hipster’ aesthetic) who had come almost entirely from outside the area to celebrate and see a band. The Continental, just down the street, is much the same: “It’s cool, a quiet place if you go in the early evening,” says Blütt, but because it serves alcohol until 4:00am most days, eventually “it gets stupid, it’s terrible. […]” And, you know, that place was – just like this place – it was called the Continental before, it was a local scummy dive bar that was, I think, was even too scummy for people to go into.” Feed, next door, is also certainly a destination, and this place that wants to look like a Nebraska truck stop features a brunch menu that is nearly half vegetarian options and includes chorizo chilaquiles (which
implies an expectation that the mostly-non-Hispanic clientele will be familiar with chilaquiles) and the drink special “Gin and Tonic (bring your own gin).”

The alderman again is well aware of what is going on: “It appeals to people from the artists community and people who I would consider from the creative class,” he told me happily. And Blütt remembers bohemian times past that are clearly no more: “Like four or five buildings west of here were all these kind of run down apartment buildings, but all these kinda cool people lived in ‘em, and they all shared one giant back yard, had all the dogs in there, I used to bring the dogs over and let them run around. Those got sold, or they evicted everyone, to rehab them or whatever.”

Regardless, all of the people I spoke with about gentrification and hipness agreed that their neighborhood was no Wicker Park. J actually actively tries to dissuade what he calls “the whole Wicker Park bicycle messenger indie rock crowd” from hanging out in his coffee shop by playing Led Zeppelin and Guns N Roses (older rock bands that he believes they dislike), and he claims to be more focused on just supporting himself to do what he likes doing (roasting coffee, being part of the community, and playing in a band) than making lots of money. Even Ernie, who does not hide his more middle-class, homeowner desire to see the neighborhood improve, is happily confident that it is much quieter and more welcoming than trendier areas. I observed several examples of a nascent “creative industry” in the neighborhood (a printing house, several graphic, industrial, and interior design firms, a couple architecture offices, and a web developer), but nothing on the scale of Wicker Park’s “digital bohemia” described by Lloyd (2006: 207-211). And more ‘traditional’ art practice is still central for many I spoke to there; both Ben and Blütt consider themselves professional artists and even the young baristas at Star Lounge are practicing artists or performers. In J’s opinion, “the culture here is just wonderful for as down to earth as everybody is. […] This neighborhood has this potential
art focus you’d find up in six corners up in Wicker Park, coming in here, but there’s this quality of life here. This neighborhood is very much about quality of life.”

It is a delicate balance, and the theme of the neighborhood being great but not \textit{that great} is recurring (and probably central to its potential as an emerging hip neighborhood). The following description of the social scene and its new residents from Blütt is probably the fairest overall assessment:

“Yeah, there’s definitely a lot of 20-somethings and 30-somethings that are not exactly young professionals, they’re not all white-collar folks by any stretch. There are like some people who own a photo studio over here off Smith Park, there’s another one here on Chicago, so I guess you have a sort of more media-ish thing going on, but they’re all young people. […] So you got some of that, and you got like the like hipster bike crowd factor, the Art Institute bunch of college students factor […] You know it’s like the artsy types, and the indy rock types, you know, those kind of people are around here.”

So we might say that the Edgetown area is not entirely at the complete ‘fringe’ that it might have been five years ago, when Blütt had first moved in to a live-work loft space, Feed was a Mexican restaurant, the Continental was a run down hole in the wall, and the first new buildings were just coming up west of Western Ave. This liminal area is, no surprise, changing. As Lloyd (2006: 237) writes, “The sense of being always already over” is inherent to bohemia. He goes on to remind us that “anyone who has lived in Wicker Park for more than a few months feels entitled, and perhaps obligated, to insist that the neighborhood was much better in the old days.”

\textbf{An Emerging Community Identity in Edgetown?}

Though space does not allow for their deeper discussion, I should reemphasize here that there are \textit{multiple} communities already existing in Edgetown, from its overlap with Ukrainian Village and the more family-focused community around Smith Park to newer immigrants and the transitory social worlds of those who live on the streets or pass
through for work and play. But there is a new community forming here as well, a community with the potential to shape local identity. To the degree that this community is taking hold, much of the work is being done over the counter at Star Lounge, J’s ‘coffee bar’ on Chicago Ave. that has become a hearth of sorts for social life in Edgetown, filled with regulars and local baristas (some of whom are often there even when not ‘on duty’).

Star Lounge was first opened by property developers who were rehabilitating the building itself and thought a coffee shop would be a good idea. They hired J to run it, but when they closed it within months, deciding it would be unprofitable, J was able to purchase the business with the apparently substantial help of various members of the local community; when it was near financial collapse a year later, J says, locals pitched in again. Everyone I talked to about Star Lounge spoke gushingly about how happy they are that it did not close and how important it is to have this place in the neighborhood. In Blütt’s words:

“It’s kind of become one of the new places that’s filled in the void of that was left by Filter [a former coffee shop and neo-bohemian institution] in Wicker Park. […] And so, this opened up and kinda saved everybody’s ass. People were leaving Wicker Park anyway, and a lot of them were coming over this way, this place just fell into everybody’s laps. […] It’s become like the hub for people just coming and going.”

A related theme of the emerging community is the informal system of support and exchange that exists, especially around Star Lounge. A good example is Ben, the young artist who hangs around the café and illustrates things like menus or the bags that coffee beans are sold in, in exchange for free coffee and a place to hang out. Likewise, because many of the regulars are owners or employees of other businesses in the neighborhood, a sort of reciprocity exists where, for example, most local bartenders or other service staff can expect free coffee, which pays off when Star Lounge baristas make their way to local
bars after work and likewise drink for free. J recently added an entirely new menu at Star Lounge that features food from other neighborhood establishments. And the café space even doubles as a gallery for local artwork, including that of Blütt, who had a three month show there.

All of this reciprocity translates into a broader community ethic of support, a general sense of wanting the community to succeed. Ernie, for example, has embraced such an ethic, telling me that, though he is used to driving for things, “I mean I’d rather come here [Star Lounge] than Starbucks. I’d rather go to Farmer’s Pride [a grocer] than Jewel. And I’ve been ending up going to Komoda [a giftshop] instead of Barnes and Noble.” Even the insular Ukrainian community (Ernie still doesn’t feel welcome in some places after ten years living around the corner), has shown signs of opening up. J tells me:

“At first no Ukrainians were coming in here, then the younger generation Ukrainians, now the older generation […] Everyone said it’s like it’ll never happen, never happen, they won’t come in here. […] You walk in to what is their neighborhood, there are families and families and families, probably got lots property, they want to raise their kids here. And then you have some half-Mexican, tattooed kid coming in here opening a business, and they still patronize you because you treat them with respect.”

Looking Over the Edge in a Liminal Place

So where does all of this leave the study area today? First, despite J’s best efforts and the very real communal support described, if seems unlikely that a single spatial identity will coalesce in the neighborhood any time soon. Ukrainians and other long-established neighborhood groups remain major landowners in the area, and while some are part of the gentrification process as free-agent developers, others largely promote their own group identity. Even aside from the gentrifiers and ‘hipsters’ of Chicago Ave., there is plenty of conflict and disagreement – Ernie tells a story of a political fight last year between the Poles, Ukrainians and Italians over commemoration rights on a fountain in Smith Park.
Furthermore, as I have emphasized throughout, the area is always changing. Even people I spoke to who have lived in the Edgetown area for less than a year repeated that they feel it has “changed a lot” since they arrived. Blütt is leaving for cheaper soil, heading “six blocks north and two blocks west” into Humboldt Park. “I would like to stay right over here, and I tried,” he laments, “but there wasn’t anything cheap enough and nice enough at the same time.” Factories have been replaced with condos, design firms and yoga studios have arrived, and the area is not entirely the rough, unknown fringe that people like Ben might like to think it is.

Spatially, however, it remains very much the edge. Beyond the imposing physical boundary created by the industrial corridor, there are two additional reasons to believe this may be a more stubborn boundary than previous edges of gentrification to the east. First, we cannot ignore the collapse of the lending and housing markets in 2008 and the accompanying “financial downturn.” This is a likely culprit for the number of empty condo buildings near Chicago and California Aves., for example, and certainly it has knocked property values down some according to homeowners I spoke with. Construction has slowed to a halt, a change that José has noticed dramatically, with lunchtime business at his taco stand down from a “big ass line outside […] or a phone call: 40 tacos, 50!” to a situation in which he has had to send some staff home. J, however, is philosophical about the economy:

“It went up and then, you know, ‘the depression’ happened and its sort of leveled out, but its not gonna drop. […] That’s how it’s always worked in the entire city of Chicago since the beginning; it’s been like this giant bubble. Like it will bubble over and pop, and go backwards. And after it pops it goes back, kinda decrease in value, and then bubble back up, and then pop, and it just keeps going farther and farther west.”

The second reason may be less fluid. The reality is that beyond the industrial corridor is a different type of place – not geographically really (though it is slightly
further from the Loop), nor even spatio-economically (while poorer, it has similar housing stock and amenities to other pre-gentrification areas), but socially and historically. When one emerges from under the elevated train tracks that cross Chicago Ave. like a theme park gateway, they are in a different world: the almost-entirely African American West Side. In the context of Chicago history, the gentrification of this sort of area would seem a much higher hurdle.

Certainly the distinction is well established in people’s cognitive maps (Suttles, 1972) and associated with a fair amount of language about crime and violence and things “going down hill” in that direction. Even the most intrepid urban pioneers I spoke to draw the line here. J, who describes himself as “half-Mexican,” worries the area is dangerous, remembering it having been described to him as “the jungle.” Another white male said of an apartment he had considered there that “I couldn’t even be gone all day at work and like not wonder if I’m gonna come home and it’s broken into. [...] It’s like, you know, it’s cheap, but it’s not worth it.” Of course, almost every one of my respondents who described these West Side areas as crime-ridden were quick to criticize outsiders further east for their misperception of the Edgetown area in the same fearful way. Nonetheless, for the relative newcomers in search of the edge, beyond this point, to extend Aaron’s metaphor, you may have gone off the edge of the island.

So is it possible then that the Edgetown area represents a unique space and time for hip gentrification in Chicago? Is it the edge of the island, or, to borrow the language of Hunter S. Thompson’s (1971), the “high-water mark” where the wave of gentrification has broken? At the moment, due to a unique socio-spatial constellation of cultural, economic, geographic, and historical conditions, the western edge of Edgetown may be just this. Whether it ultimately rolls back at the seawall of race and economic stagnation or once again, in J’s words, bubbles up, remains to be seen.
We can see that a liminal place like the Edgetown area is in fact less anonymous than originally expected, if no less undergoing massive changes. My study demonstrates that while neighborhood change and gentrification are undoubtedly in part caused by traditional explanations like invasion and succession, growth machines, and the basic production and consumption of space through speculation and development, a related but still essentially unique component of the ‘hipster’ subculture itself also plays a role: the fetishism not just of the authentic but of the undiscovered, represented in the march to the edge of the island. This last component should not, in theory, be directly affected by economic downturns or racial prejudices, but one has to wonder to what degree it is still symbiotically reliant upon the economic. This is a question that cuts to the heart of the chicken and egg story of gentrification, neighborhood identity, and community, and one that continuing to watch ‘liminal places’ on the edge of hipness like this one can help to answer.

Notes

1. As J told me, some long-time residents may actually fear that the real-estate industry will catch on to ‘The Patch’ as an identity: “They don’t wanna blow it up, because they don’t want it to become a real estate market – [he does an impression of a real-estate agent:] ‘You live in The Patch! It’s not quite Humboldt Park! It’s not quite Ukrainian Village!’ – you know? […] I mean they can call it whatever they wanna call it, [he says dismissively] but, you know, they’re gonna eventually call it ‘West Wicker Park.’”

2. For example, while observing activities at a coffee shop on the south side of the avenue, I overheard several baristas hatching a plan to bring all of the business’s recyclables to a customer’s alley on the north side, in the First Ward where recycling services are better.

3. The term ‘hipster,’ in its contemporary popular usage, has probably been so over-used and widely adopted that it has lost much real meaning (Leland, 2006), yet at the same time it has arguably never been satisfactorily defined in academic social research. Though I have no pretensions of doing any better, I offer my own attempt (with much owed to Leland, 2006 and Lloyd, 2006, among others): I use the term to describe an evolving aesthetic- and lifestyle-based cultural identity generally attributed to young adults, predominantly white and urban, defined by an ‘ahead-of-the-trend’ attention to music, fashion and lifestyle fads. There are, almost by definition, countless and changing examples, but the culture is closely tied to a search for and appreciation of perceived authenticity and cutting-edge cultural capital, and the aesthetic itself might generally be characterized by a distinctive and usually quasi-ironic appreciation for the
styles of prior generations (often those initially defined by African American youth or the white working class), in addition to components commonly associated with contemporary punk rock or progressive activist subcultures. I have tried to distinguish use of the term where possible from the likes of ‘real’ artists, punks, creative professionals, or other more specific types of Lloyd’s neo-bohemians, but rely on ‘hipster’ as a general descriptive of the young, hip urbanites defining contemporary (white) alternative-mainstream culture.

4. On one weekday in June, 2009, among the 18 apartments listed for rent on Craigslist.com in the area between Sacramento and Western Aves., including and south of Augusta, the average monthly rent for a room was $602, including one $1400 outlier in the Smith Park area. By comparison, 18 randomly selected (if not statistically representative) rental listings in the Wicker Park area between North Ave. and Division St. within a few blocks of Milwaukee Ave. had an average price per room of $877. There were also far more properties listed in Wicker Park and many other neighborhoods than in the Edgetown area.

References


Appendix A. Study Area Overview Showing Surrounding Community Areas and Neighborhoods

Map created by the author with ArcGIS software from US Census Bureau year 2000 tiger data.
Appendix B. Majority Ethnic Groups Across West Town and Humboldt Park by 2000 Census Tracts

Legend

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<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.49 - 0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.49 - 0.88</td>
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</tbody>
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Map created by the author with ArcGIS software from US Census Bureau year 2000 tiger files.
Appendix C. Land Use in Edgetown Area, 1990 and 2009

Bottom figure created by the author from personal land-use survey and Google Maps satellite imagery.