

INTRODUCTION



In Search of Working-Class Chicago

Chicago served as one of the first laboratories for early social scientists. For nearly a century, scholars from the University of Chicago have taken to the streets to examine life in urban America. American sociology was born in the city's dilapidated neighborhoods of crowded tenements and cold-water flats. In 1907, Upton Sinclair's literary masterpiece *The Jungle* created a devastating portrait of life in Chicago's South Side slums and awakened Americans to the hardships faced by immigrant laborers and their families.¹ Yet today, almost 100 years later, the working-class descendants of these immigrants who toiled in Chicago's factories, stockyards, and railroads—the white ethnics—have received almost no attention from contemporary scholars. Maybe it is because Americans have largely defined themselves as citizens of a classless, meritocratic society, or maybe it is because a disproportionate percentage of Americans see themselves as middle class. Whatever the reasons, scholars have turned a blind eye to examining the lives of more modestly employed urban ethnic whites.

The peculiar difficulties inherent in defining who exactly comprises the working class exacerbates the challenges of chronicling the lives of this segment of American society. Dated categories of blue- and pink-collar work no longer describe the texture of working-class labor, and as a result, more complex and nuanced thinking is needed.² Michèle Lamont, a sociologist whose work considers the cultural boundaries created around class and race, defines “working-class men and women as blue-collar and lower-middle class workers with stable employment and high-school diplomas, but not college degrees, which means that they face severe barriers in access to jobs and other social benefits.” Lamont continues, “in a time when the upper middle class is becoming more isolated socially and geographically from other groups, such isolation fosters a social myopia that makes it increasingly difficult for the college-educated, academics, and policy makers to see how distinctive a working-class understanding of the world is.”³

The few studies of white working-class life that do exist (namely, Lillian Rubin’s *Worlds of Pain*, David Halle’s *America’s Working Man*, William Kornblum’s *Blue Collar Community*, Rick Fantasia’s *Cultures of Solidarity*, and Jonathan Rieder’s *Canarsie*) provide portraits of life in the 1960s and 1970s and tend to focus on race relations or shop floor life. Michèle Lamont’s *The Dignity of Working Men* and John Hartigan’s *Racial Situations* are the first modern studies of blue-collar Americans to appear in over a decade.

However, as scholarly interest in the urban white working class waned, attention to racialized notions of the inner city and the underclass flourished.⁴ By the late 1970s, public and scholarly discourse on urban life focused almost exclusively on the plight of ghetto neighborhoods. Race, poverty, and the inner city have become inextricably linked in the public consciousness, and most Americans assume, albeit incorrectly, that low-income African Americans residing in inner cities make up the overwhelming majority of Americans living in poverty. Few Americans even realize that large numbers of the poor are whites residing in rural areas.⁵

Yet while modern-day studies of working-class whites are few and far between, *historical* accounts of blue-collar urban dwellers abound. Since 1996, historians such as John McGreevey, Gerald Gamm, Wendell Pritchett, and Thomas Sugrue have written about the “urban villages” ethnic whites created during the first part of the twentieth century. Historians’ interest in the ethnic enclave story mirrors growing public and academic interest in inner-city ghettos and the underclass. To such experts, the form of the modern-day ghetto can be directly traced back to the racist interests of working-class whites. According to these scholars, blue-collar white ethnics were more prone than other groups to racial violence because they felt they had the most to lose if integration came to pass. From the vantage point of racist working-class whites, the arrival of blacks violated racial norms of conduct, threatened to spread poverty and crime, and meant the demise of precious local institutions such as the parish. Furthermore, ethnic whites’ “peasant” sensibilities concerning the significance of land fueled the white population’s all-consuming drive to achieve the goal of homeownership.⁶ From this perspective, the distinctively working-class white desire to own a home, in conjunction with the institutional need of Catholic parishes to maintain strong spatial claims to the community in which a congregation’s members lived, set the stage for the racist extremism of white ethnics.

Even though these historical arguments offer important insights into the development of working-class urban whites’ racist belief systems, for intellectuals and policymakers it often seems as if ethnic whites have become convenient scapegoats for racism in the same way that the ghetto and its residents are scapegoats for working-class whites’ denial and fear. Such accounts of urban history may offer soothing relief for upper-middle-class white guilt over the state of race relations in the postindustrial city, but these versions of history do little to challenge conventional wisdom about race, racism, and racists.

To comprehend the complexities of race, class, and urbanism in the twenty-first century, it is not enough to document the hardships of the

oppressed and assign blame. As a society, we must also endeavor to understand how anxiety, anger, hostility, and resentment impede tolerance; indeed, tolerance only comes after every voice of dissent is heard. At the heart of this book is a desire to give a voice to a segment of the population we know very little about beyond the media accounts of bussing and desegregation throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

The inhabitants of Beltway,⁷ a working-class neighborhood located on Chicago's Southwest Side, are usually an engaging, straightforward, generous, boisterous, open, patriotic, warm, and trusting lot. At other times, they can be angry, resentful, jealous, insecure, bigoted, ignorant, and downright petty. What many people might find most surprising is that Beltwayites do not explicitly teach their children to hate others because of skin color. They believe in the ideals of justice, liberty, and fair play. More than any other segment of American society, they see purity and truth in the promise of the American Dream.

My purpose in telling the story of one Chicago neighborhood is to show how race relations have evolved since the Civil Rights era, and how complex views of race define residents' distinctive *sense of place*. As ethnographer, interviewer, and scholar, I am the reader's guide into the world Beltway dwellers labor to create. This book should leave the reader with an understanding of how the people I describe make sense of the world.

THE GHETTO AND THE GARDEN

Sociologist Gerald Suttles describes working-class neighborhoods like Chicago's Beltway as defended neighborhoods, in other words, local areas threatened by social or ecological change.⁸ In previous ethnographic accounts (notably Jonathan Rieder's impressive study of working- and lower-middle-class Jews and Italians in Canarsie), scholars have painstakingly documented working-class urban whites' terror of neighborhood turnover. On one level, the story of Chicago's Beltway during the 1990s continues where Rieder's story of Brooklyn's Canarsie of the 1970s and 1980s leaves

off. Neither place has stood frozen in time. While Rieder chronicles how local activists work to keep out poor blacks, my portrait of neighborhood life in Beltway demonstrates what residents want to defend, and most important, what they would mourn the loss of if the neighborhood ceased to exist. This work explores the ways in which the neighborhood symbolizes everything its working-class residents value—hard work, honesty, patriotism, and respectability—and the fact that the people of Beltway are ready to defend their sense of place at any cost. “Echoing the words of conservative politicians, the people of Beltway view themselves as the protectors of civilization in an imperiled world. This conviction is expressed through the care with which they keep their homes clean, cultivate their gardens, maintain their property, and celebrate the nation. The neighborhood’s working- and lower-middle-class residents inscribe their class-bound moral values into their physical surroundings as they fortify moral and symbolic boundaries against the social forces that threaten their way of life.”⁹

When I first arrived in Beltway, I planned to document how residents use and interpret race in their everyday lives. Over four years of participating in and observing life in Beltway forced me not so much to alter as to expand my thinking to incorporate what geographers have termed the sense of place—in other words, the meaning people attach to place. What Beltway residents want to defend goes beyond the old notions of racial antagonisms and fears. The people of Beltway seem to share a collective understanding of how their place ought to look and, in a philosophical sense, how its residents ought to be. Neighbors act on this shared sense of place; it inspires them to decorate their front yards for Christmas and imbues them with a sense of outrage at the sight of graffiti. This profound and pervasive sense of place serves as a catalyst for civic activism in response to even the smallest violations of the visual landscape. At the same time, nonwhites—specifically Mexican Americans—are cautiously welcomed to the community as long as they show themselves to be good neighbors who maintain their property and care for their children. Individuals who violate the landscape—and that includes other working-class whites—become the objects of scorn and derision.

Through a powerful sense of place, Beltway residents have created a complex cognitive-emotional geography of home that configures the good life on three levels: that of the household, the community, and the nation. In this study of Beltway, I demonstrate how keeping a fastidious house, standing in a dreary rain-soaked parking lot to commemorate Memorial Day, and generating more effective collective action over graffiti than gang-related violence become explicable and culturally rational when one understands the central myth of *the last garden*. In the pages that follow, I will carry on the Chicago School's tradition of street-level scholarship as I examine life in that garden. I believe that the stories of the men and women of Beltway offer provocative insights into the nature of working-class life in an American city at the dawn of the twenty-first century.



In the 1970s, when African Americans from Chicago's West Side ghetto started migrating to Oak Park, community leaders set up a housing counseling program. Blacks who wanted to move to Oak Park, a comfortable middle-class town known for its fine examples of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture, "were helped to analyze their housing needs and advised to consider other suburbs. The program was a success, in that Oak Park never experienced rapid racial change, as had nearby city neighborhoods. It remained a solidly middle-class place, and its approach to managed integration was praised nationally."¹⁰ Can you imagine what the reaction would be if a similar program were set up in Southwest Side neighborhoods like Beltway? Residents and local activists would be accused of outright racial steering. Civil rights commissioners would be ordered to investigate the problem. For when it comes to issues of race, there is one set of rules for members of the middle-class elites and another for blue-collar neighborhoods.

During the postwar-era fight over segregation, the people who shouted in heavily accented English and shook their fists at blacks demanding an end to segregation seemed little more than barbarians to

the enlightened elements of middle-class Americans who could afford to flee. As the historian Arnold Hirsch notes, nothing would have shocked the residents of Chicago's Gold Coast or Hyde Park (home to the prestigious University of Chicago) "more than the assertion that they were part of a generalized *white* effort to control the process of racial succession in Chicago. The imputation of brotherhood (and sisterhood) with the ethnic, working-class rock throwers would have been more than they could bear. Yet," as Hirsch provocatively points out, "there was just such a consensus. Each of the various white groups or interests agreed on the fundamental undesirability of racial succession. Each of them (social elite and blue collar) were, for their own reasons, unable or unwilling to flee the city, and each believed that the process had to be controlled to protect their self-defined claims. While there was certainly a divergence in the means that were available to manage succession (the elites preferred urban renewal, managed integration, and political expediencies whereas the working class relied on grassroots demonstrations, incendiary rhetoric, and violence), identical fears about living in close proximity to large numbers of poor blacks inspired their action." Although the calls for integration among the politically and socially powerful were in sharp contrast to the racist diatribes voiced by working-class whites in the Bungalow Belt, "the justifications given for actions taken reveal the differences among the various white groups to be more in the vehemence of the language and the sophistication of the resistance than in fundamental assumptions."¹¹ Working-class whites were looked down upon as ignorant thugs by their middle-class counterparts. To the working-class whites, middle-class whites' calls for integration, on middle-class whites' terms, seemed utterly hypocritical.

In the end, when Civil Rights leaders turned the old racial order on its head, working-class whites were on the front lines. As the old order was dismantled, they were the segment of society most demonized and vilified for their unabashed support for the old ways of conducting racial business in this country. Because working-class whites invested so much in the efforts to defend the old racial order, in the post-Civil Rights era

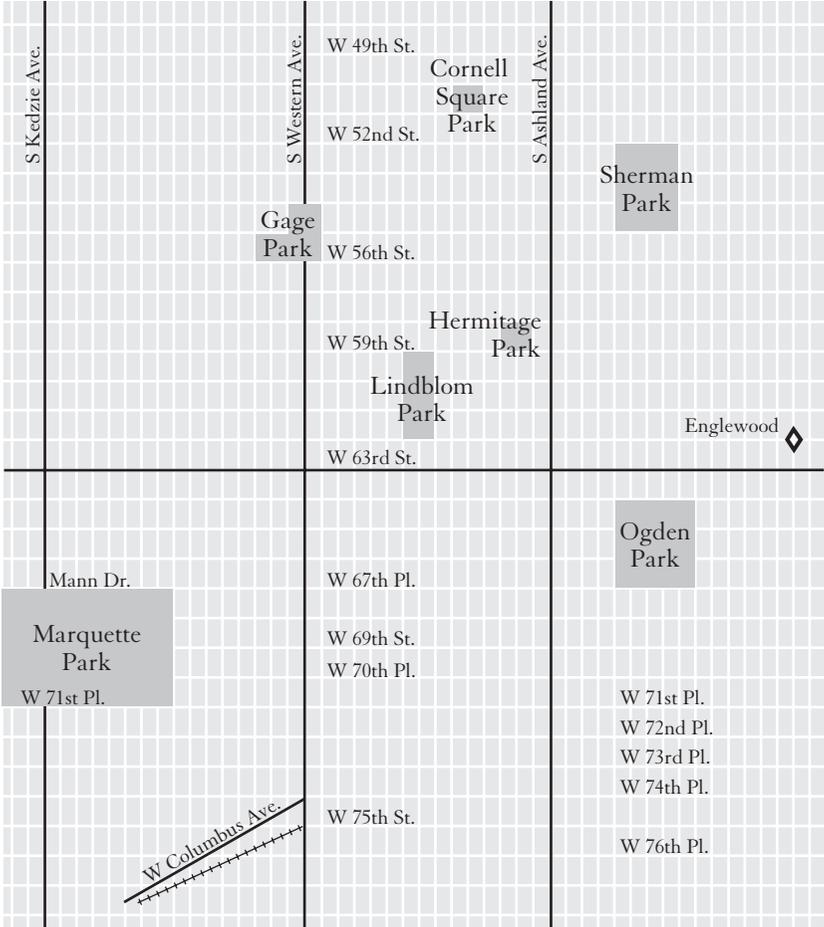
they would pay the highest reparations for being defeated. As Hirsch argues, in the wake of the Civil Rights struggle working-class whites were forced to abandon Englewood and Gage Park while places such as Hyde Park, the Loop, and Lincoln Park thrived as communities for affluent whites and carefully regulated numbers of blacks. As the growing black population burst through the old boundaries of the Black Belt, political strategies, public housing, and economic redevelopment kept black Chicagoans contained in a ghetto that was being reconfigured instead of dismantled. In the end, working-class whites witnessed their cherished neighborhoods get dragged down by the ghetto's devastation.¹² Many of the whites, those that could, ran for the safety of the suburbs or the north, south, and west sections of the Bungalow Belt.

To Chicago's Bungalow Belt working-class white inhabitants, the new world created by civil rights and desegregation made them feel as if they had woken up in the middle of a dream. Why were they the only ones fighting for the way things were and had always been when it came to race in America? The politicians had betrayed them and now blamed "good, decent, and hardworking citizens" like themselves for living by rules that were changed without their knowledge or permission. From the perspective of those living on the front lines of the battles over race, middle-class America had come by its progressive views on race on the cheap. Suburbanites watched Washington, Los Angeles, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago burn on the nightly news; middle-class urbanites were not being asked to live down the street from towering housing projects. While the true victims of race in America were, of course, African Americans, working-class whites could legitimately claim that upper-class whites could more easily avoid the costs of racial change. When the fighting had finally come to an end, somehow the residents of the gardens and the ghettos were the only ones left standing with blood on their hands.

Unlike the residents of working-class enclaves like Chicago's Bridgeport (home to both Mayor Daleys) who chose to stay and fight the racial and class changes facing their community, the working-class residents

of the Southwest Side have tended to use flight as their strategy. In these working-class white communities, as neighborhoods and housing stock age and the old-timers move on (through either illness or death), the younger generation often moves just a few blocks west to keep some distance between them and the ghetto. Over time white Bungalow Belt dwellers came to attach a “Maginot Line”-like significance to streets like Kedzie, Western, and Ashland. Each time working-class whites moved further west and south or west and north, the racial “Maginot Line” would move along with them (see Map 1). According to the work of sociologist Eileen McMahon, from 1967 to 1969 more than 2,000 families left white neighborhoods on the South Side of the Bungalow Belt for neighborhoods just to the west, places just like Beltway.

Today, many of Beltway’s residents are city workers (police officers, streets and sanitation workers, firefighters, park district employees) who must reside within the city limits as a condition of their employment. Many of these city workers admit that they would prefer to move (places like Orland Park and Tinley Park are frequently mentioned destinations), but attractive suburbs remain costly, unattainable options. Indeed, because there are so few stable, affordable, white working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods remaining in Chicago, city workers have a strong incentive to maintain the distinctive way of life Beltway provides, for “if Beltway goes, there’s no place left to go.” The widely held conviction that Beltway cannot easily be replaced makes residents protective of the community, even if they secretly long to escape.¹³ Other Beltway dwellers, particularly the older generation, are tied to the neighborhood because of their status as homeowners. The brick bungalows represent the largest single purchase of their lives. Working-class homeowners find that their financial circumstances have become inextricably linked to their neighborhood’s future. For many residents, living in one of the brick bungalows makes it possible to afford other luxuries like private school for the kids, a cabin by a lake, an RV, or possibly occasional vacations to Las Vegas and Disneyworld. A move to the suburbs means giving up the little extras. In other cases, a move to the sub-



Map 1. The racial “Magnet Line.” As Hispanics, Arabs, Asians, and African Americans have moved west through Chicago during the past three decades, the boundary separating the “Bungalow Belt” and the “Black Belt” has moved from Ashland, to Western, and most recently to Kedzie. The data was compiled from *Chicago Community Fact Book: 1990* and the U.S. Census (2000).

urbs simply holds no appeal because it means being far away from friends, family, and familiar routines.

Because Beltwayites cannot or will not flee to the suburbs, local activists must maintain the borders of their community. Residents' obsession with the visual appearance of public and private space, their solicitousness of their homes, their fears about decay and disorder—these shared common values—all serve as weapons in Beltway's symbolic defense. Over and over again, Beltwayites can be heard to evoke the militaristic imagery of the Beltway area as “the last stand.”

The “last stand” imagery resonates with young and old alike. In the words of former Alderman John Puchinski, “This area on the Southwest Side and a section of the Northwest Side are really the last two, how shall I say, bastions of neighborhood stability.” Puchinski continues, “What is happening is that people who work for the city have to live in the city of Chicago, so I’m getting a lot of younger people . . . policemen, firemen.” Fears about crime and racial turnover have forced working-class whites to abandon sections of the city that were once affordable, safe, stable, working-class, and white. The alderman explains, “There are areas of the city that are changing with high crime rates or the neighborhoods are changing, so to speak, and people are moving either to the Southwest or Northwest Side if they have to stay in the city.” In Puchinski's carefully worded description of the Southwest Side, “changing” and “bastions of stability” are loaded terms, code words for the dichotomy of the Haves (or at least the Have-a-Little-Mores) and Have-Nots, the racial divide between white and black, garden and ghetto. Mary Corrigan, a young mother and Chicago police officer who lives in Beltway with her husband Steve, also a Chicago cop, uses more blunt terms to explain the housing conundrum faced by working-class whites and working-class city workers in particular. “My husband and I are city workers and I don't know about you, but we ain't going nowhere, there's no place else to go.”

But besides “the last stand,” Beltway dwellers have other ways of talking about their corner of Chicago. Residents regularly describe the

neighborhood as “beautiful,” a “utopia,” and most evocatively, “the last garden spot in Chicago.” Beltway residents do not mind the smells from the factories, the noise from Midway Airport, or the soot that seems to cover everything. As I heard residents proclaim that their neighborhood—this place—is beautiful, I came to see the Beltway from the viewpoint of its full-time inhabitants. I took note of the elaborate lawn decorations, manicured grass, color-coordinated kitchens, fastidiously cared-for American-made cars, and graffiti-free alleys and streets. Such displays require the solicitous care of local activists and property owners. The people of Beltway willingly dedicate themselves to the care of the neighborhood landscape with an unquestioned, nearly spiritual devotion.

Most people have heard of the famous monikers for Chicago such as the line from writer Carl Sandburg, “city of big shoulders,” or “the windy city,” a reference to Chicago’s colorful political history.¹⁴ Yet the city known for the great fire of 1871 and its stockyards and meat-packing industry has as its official motto “Urbs in Horto” which, translated from Latin, means “City in a Garden.” Lifelong Southwest Sider Congressman William Lipinski regularly describes the city neighborhoods of his district as “the last garden spot in Chicago.” Congressman Lipinski explains he did not coin the expression himself; “actually it was a fellow by the name of Joe Baraka who was a barber on Archer Avenue.” Local residents are indeed devoted to landscaping and gardening. Civic groups such as the Midway Garden Club and the neighborhood Civic League along with the Beltway branch of the Chicago Public Library regularly sponsor activities for local gardeners. Events range from discussions about roses and vegetable gardens to presentations on how to create compost heaps within the environs of the city. Neighbors take great pleasure in showing off their magnificent (if sometimes over-the-top) landscaping efforts.

The notion of the garden also exists on the mythic level of the Garden of Eden. A garden is a place of cultivated order and abundance and,

without question, the two things the residents of Beltway want most to cultivate in their lives are order and abundance. Beltway symbolizes an Edenic refuge from the uncertainty and chaos whirling about its working- and lower-middle-class inhabitants. The people of Beltway define and defend their place and identity in American society in the face of the growing threat to their way of life and achievements posed by their physical and social proximity to the ghetto. In the world garden dwellers inhabit, chaos takes a multitude of forms: the ghetto, crime, poverty, abandoned buildings, graffiti, filth, unsupervised kids, gangs, and economic uncertainty. The manicured lawns, cookie-cutter houses, and clean streets transform the neighborhood's visual landscape into an oasis of order. Residents' extreme attention to cleanliness perpetuates order. The bungalow-style housing (clean, boxy, brick), the orderliness of the furnishings, and the high standard for keeping house—all the ritualistic displays of housepride—become declarations of stability and decency, particularly among women. The primordial hunger for order grows out of human beings' endeavors to make sense and meaning out of the world, for radical separation from order and meaning constitutes a fundamental threat to the individual.¹⁵

Beltway, as a place of abundance, comes to life through the dazzling displays of hospitality and consumption. At family functions such as weddings or graduation parties, food is customarily served “family style,” which means massive platters are passed around so the guests may have a choice of three or four entrées. Guests may select from a variety of popular staples including mostaccioli with meat sauce, roast pork, chicken, potatoes, dumplings (or pierogies soaked in butter), and boiled vegetables drenched in mayonnaise dressing. For dessert, kolackis, strudels, bundt cakes, cheesecakes, fruit-filled gelatin molds, fruit ambrosia, and pies will be crammed on to every free inch of table and counter space. The displays of abundance also come to life in Beltway residents' consumption of cars, houses, furniture, and even the way their kids are dressed. Indeed, the inhabitants of Beltway do not simply use

their possessions, they care for and display material goods with a nearly religious veneration. In this world, consumption is no passive, empty activity. On the contrary, among the residents of the last garden, consumption represents a serious symbolic and cultural endeavor. The working-class residents of Beltway labor to transform empty physical *space* into a symbolically significant *place* that reinforces and reproduces the values of its working-class inhabitants. A *place* is not simply discovered; people construct it as a practical activity.

Sociologists John Logan and Harvey Molotch write: “Place itself is a social construction. . . . We do not dispose of place after it is bought and used.” A place “holds a particular preciousness to its users[;] even when compared to other items, such as food, place is still distinctive.”¹⁶ In a fragile and uncertain world, the collective community-level cultivation of the last garden becomes a philosophy about the meaning of home and the good life.

Beltway is the type of community (and there are a number of others throughout the country such as Philadelphia’s Northeast, Milwaukee’s South Side neighborhoods, Boston’s Hyde Park and the old Irish and Italian sections of Brighton, Baltimore’s Hamden, and New York City’s Floral Park) that our usual image of inner-city ghettos and gentrifying neighborhoods misses. In Beltway there is a story about the nature of working-class life, about a particular kind of urbanism, and a segment of the working class that did not join the rush to the suburbs. In Gerald Gamm’s historical account of Jews and Catholics in Boston (1999), he argues that the Catholics were more likely to stay in the city because of connections to Catholic parishes versus urban Jews’ more flexible ties to their synagogues, and thus attenuated links to their neighborhoods. While parish life¹⁷ is indeed an important facet of life within the neighborhood, there are a variety of reasons that have kept the people of Beltway from fleeing to the suburbs. Given that the dust had settled in the battles for racial turf by the 1990s, most Beltway residents now view fleeing the city as a solution if and only if the streets become unsafe and “the bad neighbors start to outnumber the good ones.”



In order to document the last garden and the people of Beltway's unique sense of place, I adopted the stance of an ethnographer. I have sacrificed breadth for depth in an attempt to capture what it means to live in Beltway in all its subtlety. From 1993 to 1998, my research partner and fellow sociologist (and by 1994, my husband) Patrick Carr and I allowed ourselves to become swept up in Beltway life as much as possible. For much of our research, we relied on participant observation and detailed fieldnotes. We would visit the neighborhood to attend community meetings and local events, hang out at the library, chat over coffee in a kitchen or a local diner, and then go home and write detailed notes of what we had heard and observed. We had first come to Beltway as part of a large multi-neighborhood study sponsored by William Julius Wilson and Richard Taub at the University of Chicago's Center for the Study of Inequality. Wilson and Taub sent Patrick and me to Beltway to look at how a stable, working-/lower-middle-class white neighborhood "gets things done." More precisely, Wilson and Taub examined four stable and viable urban neighborhoods to find out what works there so that they could understand better what does not work in economically disadvantaged inner-city ghetto areas.

Because of Wilson and Taub's intellectual generosity and trust in their student researchers, Pat and I got free rein to move about the community and follow whatever seemed interesting. Admittedly, this very freedom probably resulted in our spending five years in the field. As Gerald Suttles once observed, the two hardest things about fieldwork are getting in, and getting out. Pat and I began our tentative foray into the field by carefully mapping the neighborhood in a car and on foot and reading about the neighborhood in the weekly local newspaper. Eventually, it was the newspaper that offered our first introduction to the people of Beltway when we decided to phone Helen Vidich, the author of the *Southwest News Herald's* Beltway neighborhood column. Helen's weekly column is sort of a cross between a neighborhood newsletter, so-

ciety page, and platform for musings on topics ranging from patriotism to lawn care. When we called Helen, she was guarded but still offered to meet with us at her home. She said she would invite her husband Joe and their friend, the current president of the neighborhood Civic League, Ron Zalinsky, a retired foreman for Nabisco. Helen and Joe, a retired electrician, reside in a tidy bungalow located on busy Third Avenue. We were invited to sit in the front living room, a room rarely used for entertaining. In fact, this would be one of the few times we would sit in a living room for an interview. As we came to be known in the neighborhood, most people would host us over coffee and cake around the kitchen table.

Our first trip to Beltway to meet the Vidiches and Ron Zalinsky became a two-hour-long conversation where Joe and Ron (Helen deferred to the more talkative men) talked about the Beltway Civic League, the neighborhood, their families, and local, national, and international politics. In time, we were invited to attend the monthly Civic League meetings held in the basement of the Beltway United Methodist Church. (In fact, we are members of the Civic League to this day. The newsletter still comes to our apartment in Philadelphia.) The meeting proved fortuitous, for once the three decided to vouch for Pat and me, we were welcomed into their immediate circle of acquaintances and friends. Indeed, it is through Civic League meetings that we came to meet many of our most important informants and contacts in the neighborhood.

Soon afterwards, and again with the blessing of the Vidiches and Ron Zalinsky, we were encouraged to contact Lydia Donovan and Stan Hart. Lydia, the head librarian of the Beltway branch of the Chicago Public Library, is a bubbly, intelligent, and fast-talking single mother of a teenage daughter, who found her way to the Southwest Side after growing up in Muncie, Indiana. Lydia, who holds a master's degree in library science, is one of the most well-known activists in the neighborhood. She privately admits that her inspiration for community activism comes from the writings of the radical organizer (and one-time University of Chicago sociology graduate student) Saul Alinsky. Alinsky was widely known in

the Southwest Side in the 1960s as the brilliant, charismatic leader of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Association. He eventually, however, became persona non grata to many white working-class Chicagoans when he supported efforts calling for desegregation. It was Lydia who lent Pat and me her worn paperback copy of *Rules for Radicals*.

A former president of the Civic League, Lydia became one of our key informants. She, more than any other Beltway resident, probably had the best sense of what Patrick and I hoped to accomplish in our research. As a librarian and former resident of Muncie, she was quite familiar with the Lynds' classic ethnographic study of that town titled *Middletown*. Moreover, while Lydia is quite respected and admired for her work in the neighborhood, she has adopted the Southwest Side as her home. She is not a native Beltwayite, and as such, she was an ideal informant for she could move freely within Beltway society and serve as our guide within the community while still maintaining her own more critical gaze as someone who is not truly "from" the neighborhood.

Stan Hart, a retired plumber who served in Korea, is a descendant of one of the first families to settle Beltway in the early 1900s. Hart has such affection for the Beltway neighborhood that he wrote (and published) a book on its history. In fact, on more than one occasion, when I told people in Beltway I was writing a book about the neighborhood, they would respond matter-of-factly, "Did you know Stan Hart already wrote one?" When Stan heard that Patrick and I were interested in learning about the neighborhood's history, he graciously offered to take us on a tour of "old" Beltway. His book and conversations with us served as a wonderful foundation for this contemporary study of the neighborhood. Indeed, the fact that we had spoken to "Bear" (as he is known to many in the neighborhood because of his towering lumberjack build) opened up many doors to us in the process of our research. It would be impossible to write about Beltway without talking to Stan Hart.

As I stated earlier, our first contact with a neighborhood organization came through the Beltway Civic League. The group was founded in 1960 when local women protested against a zoning ordinance petition

to expand the facilities of a chemical factory into a densely populated residential section of the neighborhood. At the first Civic League meeting we attended, Patrick and I had very purposefully seated ourselves at the far back of the church's basement hall. Ron Zalinsky, the gravel-voiced Civic League president who has run the organization since the 1980s and has been active with the group since the '60s, pounded his gavel to call the meeting to order. He then insisted that we stand up and tell the group all about ourselves and our project. Patrick fumbled through an awkward introduction and explained how we were interested in finding out about the neighborhood and "how the neighborhood gets things done." The 20 or so residents (mostly in their sixties and seventies) silently took in what we had to say. At the end of the meeting, several people came up to introduce themselves and share their opinions about a variety of subjects.

Ron later made the slight faux pas of introducing me as Pat's secretary.¹⁸ This misunderstanding was one we were quick to take advantage of: Pat would be the more talkative "man" and I would be the quiet "woman" assisting him in his work. No doubt, my presence as a woman, and later a wife, made our attendance at meetings and events less threatening and, ultimately, less strange. My gender also gave us a practical advantage in our fieldwork since we would split up and "work a room" along the naturally occurring lines of gender segregation. I would go off to chat with the women preparing food in the kitchen, and Pat would pass his time sipping coffee with the men holding court in another part of the room.

Over time, we were known as the students from the University of Chicago, an affiliation we were careful to downplay because for many white Southwest Siders the university was infamous as a hotbed of radical integrationist politics. On one of those early visits to the neighborhood, Stan Hart joked that "he had never met communists before." On another occasion, we were introduced to a local cop who had also served in Vietnam. The police officer resided in Beltway with his wife and four kids. When he heard about our connection to the university he eyed us

warily as he recalled the University of Chicago's explosive student demonstrations. For the most part, however, the people of Beltway welcomed us into their lives and their homes. If someone they knew and trusted had vouched for us through an introduction, no one would question our presence. Throughout our years in the neighborhood, there were only two occasions when people refused to speak to us or questioned our right to be there. In one instance, one of the local parish priests repeatedly declined our requests to be interviewed. In another case, when we attended a Local School Council (LSC) meeting—open to the public—the council members demanded to know if we had children at the school. Eventually, we learned that their apprehensiveness had less to do with us as researchers and more to do with the growing swell of community opposition to the manner in which they governed the council. Some months later, this very same council was dissolved by Chicago Public Schools CEO Paul Vallas after dozens of local parents organized a neighborhood-wide petition drive and letter-writing campaign to protest the LSC leadership's gross abuses of power. For the most part, the people of Beltway seemed quite flattered that Patrick and I had chosen to write books about the neighborhood. Over the years, some of our friends hoped we would move to the neighborhood permanently. We came to be known as “the Carrs” (I never corrected anyone when they referred to me by my married name), “Pat and Maria,” or the “people writing the book.”

While Pat went on to write about the community responses to crime, I decided to focus on how the people of Beltway inscribe the world they inhabit with meaning through a particular sense of place. In the beginning years of the research, I relied on fieldnotes and participant observation almost exclusively. Much of my data comes from the physical appearance of the neighborhood itself (the display of flags, the appearance of the houses, and the perfectly manicured lawns). I excavated the objects of everyday life to understand how the residents of Beltway make sense and meaning of the world they inhabit. By the end of the project, I was conducting in-depth personal interviews recorded on audiotape.

Almost all the events I describe in the book I observed firsthand, and I supplemented much of my research with newspaper accounts of local events from 1993 to 1998.

Throughout the five-year project, Patrick and I lived in Hyde Park (the South Side neighborhood where the University of Chicago is located), just a few miles east of Beltway. Many of our friends came to our home in Hyde Park, and we socialized a great deal with people in the neighborhood. Our proximity to the neighborhood made fieldwork convenient. At the same time, living in Hyde Park surrounded by the university community created a buffer zone that protected us from the dangers of going native. I also believe that living close by to (but not in) the community we were writing about helped us keep a critical distance. Our drives back to Hyde Park were invariably filled with heated conversations dissecting what we had seen, heard, and done on our visit to the neighborhood. We parlayed our contacts through the Civic League into interviews with “key informants” such as school principals, priests, a minister, police officers, and various politicians. Over time, we moved beyond such formal and institutional contacts to the more informal and intimate networks within the community. In the five years we conducted fieldwork, we worked political campaigns, went to dozens of community meetings, volunteered in a summer camp at a local park, attended birthday and graduation celebrations, chaperoned school field trips, helped out on a church camping trip for neighborhood youngsters, went to church, and baked cookies. I ate brats (bratwurst) (because Pat is a vegetarian), Pat drank beer (because I rarely drink), and we both drank lots of pop and coffee and consumed lots of kolackis, coffee cakes, pierogies, and mostacioli.

My most sustained and richest contacts with the neighborhood came through a group called the bunco squad. A group of mothers (and one grandmother) from the Hastings School socialized once a month, taking turns to entertain the group of about dozen women with bunco parties. Bunco is a gambling dice game and a strictly enforced women only (i.e., no kids, no men) affair. Husbands were exiled from the house for

the evening and kids were sent off to bed. Each of the guests brought chips, dips, and assorted junk food snacks. The hostess provided pop and her kitchen or basement family room. These evenings were opportunities to gossip, get bawdy and raunchy, de-brief, complain, and maybe escape from the daily grind of work, family, and marriage. At these gatherings women opened a window into the viewpoints and experiences of decent, hardworking, working- and lower-middle-class women with children.

A cautionary word may help the reader make sense of the book. In the course of my time in Beltway, I had to make choices about the people and places I could visit. Because of my initial focus on social organization, my primary contacts were with individuals most active in community groups and civic life. To a large extent, a disproportionate amount of my time was spent with people who embrace the values of the last garden. Clearly, there are those who resist the safe and restrictive world the people of Beltway inhabit. Beltway is probably not the easiest place to live if you are gay, poor, neither working- nor lower-middle-class, overly educated, unmarried, or not Catholic. Not “fitting in” in Beltway can make life there complicated, if not downright uncomfortable. Yet, over the five years I spent in Beltway, I did come to know people who lived on the outskirts of the last garden’s value system. If they had lawns that were overgrown or houses that were not decorated with color-coordinated curtains and upholstery, these people were certainly cognizant of how their choices represented a rejection of the values most of their neighbors chose to embrace. Some residents would joke about how not having a well-maintained home made them seem more “white trash” than their neighbors.¹⁹ For others, the overgrown lawns were a means of exacting their private revenge on the controlling way of life the garden represents. In some instances, people were terrified to let others into their homes for fear their neighbors would think less of them for “how my house is.” However, whether one embraces or reviles the values of the last garden, all the people of Beltway are no doubt aware of the rules that govern life there. More important, people are drawn to

the garden because this strictly enforced sense of place makes them feel safe, comfortable, and reassured that the danger and chaos of the ghettos just to the east will not engulf them.

♦ ♦ ♦

Chapter One, titled “Rethinking Race in the Ethnic White Enclave,” provides a brief history of Beltway including an overview of the demographic, social, and racial transformations in the neighborhood and the city of Chicago as a whole. Chronicling the racial hostilities that crystallized most outsiders’ impressions of what it means to live in a defended working-class urban neighborhood like Beltway will serve as the starting point for this account of life in working-class Chicago. To maintain the idea that places such as Beltway are inhabited solely by satirical caricatures, Archie Bunker–like figures who refuse to accept the social transformations of the last 40 years, is to gloss over a powerful and important segment of the American population. People living in places like Beltway regularly vote in presidential elections, pay their taxes, work hard to care for their families, purchase homes, cars, and other consumer goods, and, most important, believe that they represent the moral core of American society.

Chapter Two, “A Precious Corner of the World,” documents how place, on the level of the neighborhood, reflects and reinforces Beltwayites’ understanding of their social location in the world. The neighborhood’s sense of place is a possession that neighbors may claim through their efforts and labors to keep Beltway “as best they can.” And Beltway, as the last garden spot in Chicago sitting on the edge of the ghetto, is a place that must be protected from the destructive forces of decay, disorder, filth, poverty, and crime. Beltwayites’ fears about graffiti and crime are not merely expressions of racism; rather, they reflect residents’ insecurities about holding on to the appearance of order, abundance, and respectability they have worked so hard to cultivate. On one level, battles over segregation have scarred working-class Chicagoans. Past experiences make Beltway residents fearful about sharing their community

with people who are different. At the same time, practical realities and the victories of the Civil Rights era compel Beltwayites to see beyond the old racial order. While racial animosities persist, Beltwayites appear more willing than ever before to make their community open to people of color. Such newcomers will be welcomed—or at least tolerated—as long as they join the fight against crime and chaos. The case of Orlando Santos, a neighborhood teenager caught vandalizing the windows of a local elementary school, shows how race, class, and place collide in residents' current endeavors to protect the neighborhood and its distinctive way of life. The deaths of Teresa Powell and Melissa Harvey, two 13-year-old girls from the neighborhood who were shot by local teenagers, illustrate the irony of how residents' ongoing efforts to maintain the visual landscape mask the symptoms of homegrown problems Beltwayites customarily associate with the ghetto and low-income minority populations.

In Chapter Three, "Home, Sweet Home," I use thick description to show how Beltway's working-class residents, in particular women, use the appearance of their homes and property to make sincere and powerful declarations about self. Home-ownership is not just an economically relevant activity; it also has cultural and symbolic elements that play important roles in working-class Beltwayites' social performances and their ideas about identity, status, and moral worth. Moreover, just as they do on the level of the neighborhood, Beltwayites use the ordered, self-conscious household displays as talismans to protect their way of life from the destructive social forces that undermine their claims to respectability and stability.

Chapter Four, "For Country and Home," explores the nested relationships between hearth and home, neighborhood and nation. Memorial Day services for area veterans, celebrations of patriotism through displays of flags and recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance, and even displaying POW/MIA bumper stickers make the nation come to life on the *local* level for Beltway's garden dwellers. Recent history with wars in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf have taught Beltwayites to be cynical

about the motives of politicians who are so willing to send “our boys” to fight for nebulous corporate interests and political strategy. Instead, the people of Beltway believe that the real America exists in the lives of ordinary citizens such as themselves. Veterans insist they were not fighting for political ideologues, they were fighting to guard their right “to the pursuit of happiness” and “to return home to their families and homes” in places like Beltway. The people of Beltway also proudly declare they are American, without double-barreled disclaimers like “Mexican American” or “Italian American,” for being American is to move beyond the poverty of immigrant forbears. Beltwayites believe they earn their status as Americans through hard work, sacrifice, morality, love of country, and caring for home, family, and community.

In the Conclusion, I review how the story of Beltway instructs us about class, culture, race and ethnicity, and community in the postindustrial city of the post–Civil Rights era. Ultimately, what the people of Beltway would mourn the loss of if “the garden” ceased to exist is a distinctive sense of place that reinforces the values residents use to make meaning and order in their everyday lives.

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At one point while I was writing this book a professor friend who grew up in a working-class Northwest Side neighborhood “not quite as nice as” Beltway mused (with genuine concern) that the book might become a handbook for cynical politicians to tap into the populist resentment of the white working class. While I am pleased that anyone, in particular nonsociologists, might be interested in purchasing this book, my purpose in writing it is neither to lobby for a particular constituency nor to ridicule a segment of the population. As an ethnographer and a scholar, I aim to explain sociologically how the people of Beltway make sense of the world they inhabit and cultivate a sense of place that embodies their values about the home, the neighborhood, and the nation. If, in the process of hearing this story, the reader comes to empathize with the people in the book, I am optimistic that this understanding will give us in-

sight into a group of people who are too often simplistically dismissed as racist and parochial. By coming to terms with what the last garden's dwellers cherish and want to protect, one can explain sociologically how white Beltwayites came to feel the way they do about matters that have powerful social and political implications. I can only hope that this knowledge will help improve relations among all city dwellers, but particularly the ones living in the gardens and the ghettos.

The fact that I have tried to inject as little of myself as possible into this narrative may leave some readers with the impression that I have sided with the interests of urban "whites" fearful about poverty, crime, and racial turnover. Others may be pained about how I have portrayed the people of Beltway. They may accuse me of being a bourgeois, elitist intellectual who is ridiculing the people I describe. Neither one of these interpretations is correct. It is my wish that this book will serve as a map, of sorts, to the last garden's cultural landscape.