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The Politics of Race, Class, and Gentrification in the ATL

Keith Jennings

Introduction

Atlanta, Georgia, the ATL or “hotlanta,” is often referred to as the capital of the New South or the home of the modern-day civil rights movement. Because the Atlanta metropolitan region has gained more African Americans than any other region in the United States since 1990, in popular culture, it is even seen as the “Black Mecca,” a destination where Black people are empowered and opportunities exist for African Americans in all sectors of society. In fact, the Atlanta metro region accounted for nearly one-fifth of all Black population growth occurring in the nation’s 100 largest metro areas since 2000. That level of growth has led to African Americans making up 33 percent of all residents in the metro region and to the third highest total of African American households with incomes above \$ 100,000 (Pooley, 2015).

The perception and the reality of Atlanta, however, are quite different. While Atlanta does continue to offer promise and opportunities for many better educated African Americans, the city remains one of the most segregated and impoverished cities in America. The city has the third largest disparity between rich and poor among major American cities, after Boston and New Orleans, according to the Brookings Institutions, and also has one of the worse economic mobility records of all metropolitan areas in the U.S. Moreover, African Americans are 31 percent of Georgia’s population but comprise an estimated 45 percent of the state’s poor residents. Latinos are 9 percent of the population but constitute 15 percent of those living below the poverty line. According to political scientist Karen Pooley, “the persistence of segregated housing patterns despite the ongoing suburbanization of the metropolitan region's black residents is deeply troubling. It brings serious consequences for black neighborhoods and homeowners. Whites have ‘much stronger’ preferences for living in majority-white neighborhoods.” (Pooley, 2015)

Atlanta is also a city where the poverty rate among African Americans in general, approximately 38 percent, and African American children in particular, about 57 percent, is among the highest in the nation. In fact, it was during the political ascendancy of African Americans in Atlanta that the African American poverty rate increased from 29 percent in 1970 to 35 percent in 1990 (Spotlight on Poverty, 2014). Today, the poverty rate in Atlanta is the fifth highest among central cities. In many ways the debate on gentrification in Atlanta highlights several of these issues. For example, the level of poverty among the city's African American population has been so persistent, despite the election of Black mayors and majority Black city councils since 1973, that it has been the subject of numerous research studies and continues to receive attention as one of the most pressing challenges facing the city over the next 25 years (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2015). It is also significant that the racial transformation of the city's population, i.e., the changing composition of the city due to the number of African Americans leaving the city and the number of Whites moving into the city, has been so dramatic that Atlanta has outpaced all other U.S. cities in that category. In fact, several researchers believe that as a result of the steady influx of upper and middle class Whites into the city and the growing displacement of the Black poor, the city is no longer majority Black and that fact will be confirmed when the next census is taken in 2020 (Boone, 2015).

The racial transformation of the city can best be understood within the socioeconomic, political, historic, and regional context peculiar to the Atlanta metropolitan region. Therefore, this essay argues that the aggressive form of gentrification that has been unfolding in Atlanta since the 1996 Olympics is intentional, and a manifestation of the pro-business development model promoted by a paternalistic regime politics of a coalition composed of a narrow group of privileged White corporate elites with their willing junior partners, Black politicians. The essay

also maintains that the long-term impact of public policies adopted and the type of gentrification taking place will continue to produce persistent poverty, increased income inequality, housing crises, the systematic removal of the Black poor from the city of Atlanta, and eventually the disappearance of Black politicians, many of whom have been staunch supporters of Atlanta's development model.

Methodologically, the essay uses a multidisciplinary approach to examine gentrification from a race, class, and gender perspective. Within the essay a number of the dynamics directly associated with Atlanta's political economy and the impact those dynamics are having on issues such as affordable housing, poverty, and Black employment and underemployment are analyzed. While not a central focus of the essay, the changes taking place outside of Atlanta in several counties, as a result of the push and pull effect in the metropolitan region, are briefly discussed.

Finally, special attention is given to several projects and image driven pro-business public policies, pursued by the City of Atlanta and its housing authority, which have resulted in one of the most aggressive and damaging gentrification processes underway in the United States.

The Gentrification Debate in “the City Too Busy to Hate”

Atlanta is Georgia's largest city and its capital. It is the economic and cultural hub of the ninth largest metropolitan region in the United States. Among cities, Atlanta ranks sixth economically in the U.S. and fifteenth globally, with a GDP of \$270 billion. It ranks third in cities with the largest number Fortune 500 companies headquarters within their boundaries. In fact, the Atlanta metro region has expanded so rapidly that it contains over half of Georgia's population and a majority of the state's highest paying jobs (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2015). The Atlanta

region's economic base is diverse with strong levels of employment in a variety of fields. Chief among them are transportation, trade and utilities, wholesale trade, information services, and professional business. Below is a list of some of the major companies headquartered in the Atlanta region, as reported by *Fortune* magazine in 2014.

Major Companies, Atlanta Metro Area

Company	Fortune 500 Rank	Revenue
Home Depot, Inc.	33	\$ 78,812,000,000
United Parcel Service (UPS)	50	\$ 55,438,000,000
Coca-Cola Company	58	\$ 46,854,000,000
Delta Air Lines, Inc.	81	\$ 37,773,000,000
The Southern Company	170	\$ 17,087,000,000
Genuine Parts Company	205	\$ 14,078,000,000
First Data Corporation	261	\$ 10,809,000,000
AGCO Corporation	262	\$ 10,787,000,000
Rock-Tenn Company	293	\$ 9,545,000,000
SunTrust Banks, Inc.	314	\$ 8,602,000,000

Source: *Fortune*, June 2014

Currently retail trade employs the largest segment of the region’s workforce, with 11.3 percent of those employed (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2015). Health care and education are also major strengths of the current economy. The Great Recession slowed growth and led to a high unemployment rate, but for most of the last two decades, the Atlanta metro region was the engine that has led to the state of Georgia being the growth leader among southeastern states.

Several of the largest employers and leading corporate citizens in the Atlanta metropolitan area are listed in the table below.

Largest Employers, Atlanta Metro Area

Company	Number of Employees
Delta Air Lines	31,237
Emory University	29,937
Wal-Mart Stores	20,532
Home Depot Inc.	20,000
AT&T	17,882
Kroger Co.	14,753
WelStar Health System	13,500
Publix Super Markets	9,494
United States Postal Service	9,385

Northside Hospital	9,016
Coca-Cola Company	8,761
United Parcel Service (UPS)	8,727
Piedmont Healthcare	8,707
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	8,539

Source: Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce 2015

While Atlanta is home to Fortune 500 companies and several of the largest employers in the country, it is also the home to some of the largest temporary employment agencies in the United States. For example, Randstad USA, which specializes in office administration and logistics, employs 9,000 people; Employ Bridge Holding Co., 5,739 people; Dynamics LLC, more than 4,750 people; TRC Staffing, 3,850 people; and Express Employment Professionals, 3,100 people (*Atlanta Business Chronicle*, 2014). In Atlanta, African Americans are over-represented in the temporary employment workforce, leading to their increased levels of underemployment and a racial income inequality gap, along with an official unemployment rate that has averaged 15 percent since the Great Recession.

The Atlanta metropolitan region is also home to 57 universities and technical schools. Their presence contributes to the area's competitiveness. In fact, more than 250,000 students are enrolled at four-year institutions in the region (Atlanta Regional Council for Higher Education, 2015). In addition, Atlanta's claim to world class city status was solidified when it won and hosted the 1996 Olympic Games. For the region's leaders, the Olympics were seen as a

launching pad for Atlanta's global economy. Many had believed that the Olympics would bring about broader community benefits than it actually did. Andrew Young, who was mayor at the time, believed the Olympics provided Atlanta a divine opportunity "of giving a conflict-ridden world the opportunity to learn from the harmonious lesson of Atlanta" (Rutheiser, 1996). Others, including a number of well-respected international media outlets, believed that the host city for the 1996 Olympic Games had bribed a good number of the members of the international Olympics committee to secure their votes (Rutheiser, 1996).

Over the next 25 years the Atlanta metropolitan area will add another 3 million people to its current population of more than 5 million and, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), will not have an ethnic majority population (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2015). Atlanta is one of the areas expected to have high levels of growth. Therefore, the ARC believes that because of such dynamic growth, the development of housing, employment, and supportive services will be needed throughout the region (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, Atlanta has often been referred to as the "Black Mecca" because of the city's ability to attract from across the country African Americans who work for some of the Fortune 500 companies located there. The city has also become an important base for some of the top African American entertainers in the music and film industries. The city is home to thousands of Black college students from across the country who attend school in the largest complex of historically Black colleges and universities in the U.S. Atlanta is also considered to be the modern capital of the civil and human rights movement, in part because it is the birthplace of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and home of so many civil rights era leaders.

Moreover, Atlanta has been an important symbol of Black political and economic progress since the 1973 political breakthrough when it became the first major southern city to elect a Black mayor. African American businesses comprise approximately 30 percent of the businesses in Atlanta, making the city the location with one of the highest proportions of Black businesses in the U.S. The city and metropolitan region also have the largest number of African American homeowners in the country (US Census Bureau, 2015).

The debate on gentrification in Atlanta is obviously heating up as the racial composition of the city's population is being fundamentally transformed. Like other cities in the South, such as Birmingham, New Orleans, Norfolk, and Houston, there are proponents for and detractors of gentrification. Different interpretations exist when it comes to what gentrification means for the city and various communities. In Atlanta a number of proponents, including former mayor Shirley Franklin and her housing authority director, Renee Glover, believe gentrification is good for Atlanta. Franklin argued that her administration always sought to find a balanced approach, but regardless of whatever changes that may come, she still believes the city will remain progressive and will not resort to seeing its challenges from a racial perspective. For her part, Glover continues to defend the demolition of public housing, which was a centerpiece of the redevelopment and gentrification process (Brown, 2009).

In a recent *National Journal* article, historic Atlanta was declared dead and the authors contemplated whether or not “the creative class” of young artists and engineers could revive it as they try to find a place in the city that they can call home. Brian Egan, owner of the “Goat Farm,” a new art space in downtown Atlanta, represents the attitude of most within the creative class when he says, ‘...In gentrification, I feel like artists are brought in first because they have

the vision to see what a space can become because they're creative people. *They don't see a mess. They see potential awesome space.*" (Vasilogambros and Whitman, 2015)

Creative Loafing, Atlanta's alternative newspaper, has said that the change taking place in the city is "ruthless and unapologetic," with some seeing existing neighborhoods only as opportunities for profit and redevelopment. The editors of the paper have said "gentrification in Atlanta is nothing new. Last year it was named one of seven cities 'racially altered' by the trend. Before that dubious honor, one filmmaker named his forthcoming gentrification documentary *The Atlanta Way*" (*Creative Loafing*, 2015).

Larry Keating, an expert on gentrification in Atlanta, has argued that the Black run city government has played an active role in encouraging construction of middle and upper income housing in the downtown area (Keating, 2001).

Regime Politics, Image Managers, and the Atlanta Development Model

Politics in Atlanta has historically reflected a race and class dynamic. The governing coalition in Atlanta has worked extremely hard over the past few decades to practice a type of regime politics, "an informal arrangement that surrounds and complements the formal workings of governmental authority," (Stone, 1989) that at first glance appears practical, presents an image to the world of Atlanta of being a progressive world class city where diversity is seen as strength and racial tension does not exist in the manner that it often exerts itself in other parts of the United States, but in practice actually represents an extremely narrow interpretation of what is in the public's interest.

Given the current image of Atlanta, few would believe that the Stone Mountain of today is the one referenced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous “I Have A Dream” speech, wherein he said, “let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia,” or that Atlanta was for years the headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan or that in the early 1920s the city elected a known Klansman as its mayor. Others would find it difficult to believe that there remained stiff racial resistance to Black political leadership into the late 1970s. Clarence Stone, in his book *Regime Politics*, which has remained a seminal piece on regime politics in urban America, has argued that the emergence of a biracial coalition was a result of segments of the White political and business class and Black civil and political leadership desiring to find accommodation on particular issues as the city emerged out of the segregation era (Stone, 1989).

It was the organization of Black voter leagues that made the difference in the 1940s and 1950s and the view that Atlanta could be different from Little Rock, Arkansas or Birmingham, Alabama when it came to addressing questions of race, specifically bringing an end to segregation (Bayor, 1996). In the 1960s it was also African American agency and leadership that was the engine for change. The role of the Atlanta Student Movement and its appeal for human rights is a case in point.

In his book, *The Atlanta Paradox*, author David Sjoquist asks how is it possible for poverty to be so persistent in Atlanta given its impressive growth rate over the past several decades and the election of Black public officials (Sjoquist, 2000). Former Georgia Tech professor of planning, Larry Keating, solves that paradoxical question. In his classic, *Atlanta: Race, Class and Urban Expansion*, Keating argues that:

A combination of factors make the business led regime the most potent political force on matters it considers important: History and tradition manifested in established institutions and broadly accepted terms of political engagement, businesses' central role in campaign finance, diminished but still formidable cohesiveness among the business elite, state governments' responsiveness to business initiatives and willingness to act on local issues, interlocking capacities for reciprocal rewards between business and elected officials, active coalition participation by the press, the superior capacity of business to mobilize resources on particular issues, and the corresponding capacity to withhold support for issues not deemed suitable for political consideration. (Keating, 2001, 199).

Keating (2001, 199) goes on to say:

Almost all the important policy decisions that have guided the city over the past several decades have been made not by government itself but by a small group of men...in private meetings...Researchers and historians find it difficult to discover or document the identities of the people who made important policy decisions, what their motives were, and how they reached their decisions. Because of the opacity of the governing process, a completely accurate history of Atlanta politics over the past several decades may never be written.

From the "regime politics" framework, issues of who governs and who rules and how power is exercised in Atlanta can be better understood. Most politicians are policy takers rather than policy makers in Atlanta. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there have been alterations in the regime and its political behavior over time. For example, when Maynard Jackson became mayor in 1973, it appeared that the paternalistic approach and willing junior partner role African

Americans had willingly accepted was being challenged in a major way. Jackson refused to meet with the leaders of the powerful downtown group, Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), until it put more Blacks on its board. And, according to observers, he took that position after having received a letter from the CAP chair warning him that many businesses were prepared to leave the city because of a growing perception that he was not managing the city well.

Charles Rutheiser (1996), in his work *Imagineering Atlanta*, argues that it was civil rights legend and former United Nations ambassador, Andrew Young, who reestablished the contemporary version of “regime politics” in the new global context but with essentially the old formula of a White corporate elite’s paternalistic relationship with its “Black junior partner,” and together they continued building “an imaginary city” devoid of racial tension.

The truth about the racial situation in Atlanta was somewhat different. For example, during Young’s administration the issue of the promise of the Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Authority (MARTA) to build a line to Perry Homes, a sprawling public housing project of hundreds of family units, arose when the White business elite put forth a proposal for a new line to be built to North Atlanta and the new malls on the perimeter that had been built by those who did not want to do business in the central city. The state of Georgia intervened and said it would give the MARTA Board of Directors five months to make a decision on the issue. Five months turned into two and a half weeks. Young and then Fulton County chairman, Michael Lomax, both agreed to support the plan for the new line to the northern White suburbs and to the suggestion that Perry Homes would get a bus line because it would be cheaper and therefore more affordable for the project’s residents (Keating, 2001).

The racism and disrespect embodied in the engineered decision-making process is clear. There is little wonder why so many African American working class citizens believe that Black politicians have betrayed their trust and their vote time and time again. Young, Bill Campbell, Shirley Franklin, and current Mayor Kasim Reed all share the belief that what's good for business is good for Atlanta. This is a tenet broadly accepted by most politicians desirous of becoming part of or benefiting from the governing regime.

In the 1970s the White corporate elite decided to make Atlanta a convention city. The only challenge was the need to make downtown appear safer and more attractive. This was a dilemma created by decades of fear mongering, especially about crime, and neglect that had come about as a response to the growing Black majority in the city and successive efforts to work around and ignore the old downtown area. Keating (2001, 199) says the following:

As a result of all these efforts to make Atlanta a viable convention city, downtown streets are almost empty at night. Because development and business leaders were afraid of letting conventioners mingle with the city's black population, they had created a downtown that lacked a natural, vibrant, nighttime street life.

According to Keating, after business hours, conventioners did not walk the streets. They stayed in their hotels or took taxis to other hotels. Some would actually leave the area altogether.

After a number of experiments, including the reopening of "Underground Atlanta" and placing more police and assistance officers (known as ambassadors) downtown, the city is still struggling with finding the best way to reinvent its central business district. Nevertheless, today

Atlanta has become the fourth largest convention center in the United States (Atlanta Regional Council, 1992).

The Atlanta Housing Authority and the Systematic Displacement of the Black Poor

By the early 1990s the Atlanta Housing Authority owned over 14,000 housing units in 43 properties throughout the city. This made Atlanta the city with the highest proportion of its residents living in public housing anywhere in the United States (CityLab, 2014). Ironically, Atlanta has been associated with the discussion of public housing in the United States the 1930s when it became the first city in the U.S. to build public housing. In 1936, in response to the Great Depression, Atlanta became home to the nation's first government owned housing project with the construction of Techwood Homes. The construction of University Homes two years later in 1938 was seen as the city's first public housing project for Blacks and one of the earliest in the nation.

In the run-up to the 1996 Olympics, the City of Atlanta, through its housing authority, began to systematically demolish public housing. The announced philosophy behind the plan for large scale demolition of the public housing projects was one aimed at the elimination of "islands of poverty" and crime through spatial deconcentration and dispersal of low-income families throughout the city and metropolitan region. By 2011, using Hope VI federal funding, the City of Atlanta had demolished all 14,000-plus public housing units, including some that had just been refurbished only a few years earlier. The actual number of poor people --mostly women with children, given that 79 percent of poor families in Atlanta are single parent households headed by women—displaced is debatable, but estimates run as high as 50,000 to 75,000 (CityLab, 2014).

The various housing projects in Atlanta occupied some of the most valuable land in the city. For example, McDaniel-Glenn Homes in the northwest corner of Mechanicsville sat on 41 acres of land and had 1,000 family units. East Lake Meadows was another public housing project that occupied important land. It was located next to the East Lake golf course, where the Pro Golf Association plays its last major championship of the year, which attracts all of the big stars, including Tiger Woods. Due to the high levels of crime and violence in the area, police and residents alike often referred to East Lake Meadows as “little Vietnam”. From the point of view of the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, changing the surroundings at East Lake was a priority so that it could encourage tourists to come to Atlanta to “see golf’s biggest finish” (Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2015).

In most instances at the sites where the projects once stood, the city of Atlanta negotiated with developers to replace the public housing with mixed income developments that would have a specific percentage units built for low-income residents who may have lived in the public housing units that were torn down. While laudable in purpose, evidence to date suggests that the approach taken has not solved the problem of poverty or crime in the city or necessarily provided enough affordable housing for low-income people. This is the case because in part the city officials at the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) were not as systematic in tracking construction of the strongly encouraged and agreed percentage of low-income units within the new mixed income neighborhoods as they were about demolishing the projects. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the residents, who were able to qualify and had the ability to pay rental prices, enjoyed better opportunities. However, a majority of the former residents, who received Section 8 vouchers designed to help them find and pay for privately managed apartments and houses, either moved to other poor areas of the city or moved out to such locations as Clayton County or

DeKalb County and a few other metro counties where there has been almost 160 percent percent increase in suburban poverty rate over the past 15 years, the largest increase among the nation's 25 largest metropolitan areas (Pooley, 2015). Moreover, the AHA's work requirement for eligibility to move into the mixed income developments does not fully appreciate the large number of low-income people with disabilities. The disability rate among poor males in Atlanta is 27.5 percent and for poor women it is 30.1 percent (Pooley, 2015). That AHA requires, as a condition of receiving a housing subsidy, that households must meet specific work requirement. Specifically, at least one non-elderly, non-disabled adult household member must maintain continuous full-time employment, i.e., 30 hours per week (Atlanta Housing Authority, 2015). Even if the program was responsive to the realities, it would not make a difference, given that since January 2015 the AHA's housing voucher program waiting list has been closed and, for those who are experiencing underemployment either while working full-time or part-time, they will not average 30 hours a week (Atlanta Housing Authority, 2015). Since the Great Recession more and more companies have increasingly turned to temporary employees, most of whom do not work more than 29 hours a week, thereby keeping the company from being obligated to pay that class of employees any benefits. These policies also do not appear to take into consideration the unemployment rate among African Americans or the poor generally. During the recession Georgia had the highest unemployment rate in the country. The African American unemployment rate was twice the state's average. In 2014, the National Urban League reported that African American underemployment averaged 20.5 percent nationwide. Because Georgia remains one of two states that has a minimum wage lower than the federal minimum wage, it is reasonable to surmise that the underemployment rate in Atlanta is at least consistent with the Urban Leagues' assessment, if not higher.

Shipping the Black poor and working class out of the city of Atlanta has had social and political consequences for several of the surrounding counties. For instance, in Clayton County, the home of *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell, the population changed from 70 percent White and 30 percent Black to 70 percent black and 30 percent White in little more than a decade (US Census Bureau, 2015). The dramatic population change has led to racial tensions in policing and governance. During this same period there was also a rapid growth in weekly stay hotels and child prostitution in parts of the metro region. In fact, the Atlanta metropolitan region has emerged as the major “sex trafficking” location in the southeast United States (Anderson, 2009) in part due to this network of hotels, accessible highways, and large number of strip clubs that the city has more of, on a per capita basis, than Las Vegas. As recently as January 2015, four individuals ages 18 to 21 were arrested for “allegedly running a prostitution ring out of various hotels” in Clayton County (Stevens, 2016).

Perhaps nothing typifies the development model approach that drives public policy in Atlanta as the decision to tear down all public housing in the city. Below is a table depicting the public housing projects demolished by the City of Atlanta over a 15-year period between 1996 and 2011.

Public Housing Projects Demolished by the City of Atlanta

Public Housing Project	Replaced by
Capitol Homes	Capitol Gateway
Carver Homes	The Villages at Carver

East Lake Meadows	The Villages of East Lake
Eagan Homes	Magnolia Park
Grady Homes	Ashley Auburn Pointe
Harris Homes	Ashley College Town
John Hope Homes	Villages of Castleberry Hill
McDaniel-Glenn Homes	Columbia at Mechanicsville Station
Perry Homes	West Highlands
Techwood Homes	Centennial Place
Antoine Graves	Nothing
Bankhead Courts	Nothing
Bowen Homes	Nothing
Englewood Manor	Nothing
Herndon Homes	Nothing
Hollywood Courts	Nothing
Jonesboro North	Nothing
Jonesboro South	Nothing

Leila Valley	Nothing
Palmer House	Nothing
Roosevelt House	Nothing
Thomasville Heights	Nothing
University Homes	Nothing
U-rescue Villa	Nothing

Source: The Atlanta Housing Authority 2015

An ongoing study by researchers at Georgia State University has found that residents who were forced to move were relocated into areas that often had high rates of violent crime and were overwhelmingly poor and racially segregated. Therefore, instead of eliminating poverty, as Glover claimed the demolitions were aimed to bring about, what has happened is the creation of more pockets of poverty. In fact, the researchers found early in the process that of the approximately 5,000 families who had been displaced they tracked, only 332 lived in the new developments that had been erected in their former neighborhoods (Stuart, 2011).

Affordable Housing in Atlanta

The destruction of public housing begs the question of what affordable housing for low income citizens exists in Atlanta, where the rental rate among residents living below the poverty level is 82.1 percent and, for women single headed households, 80.2 percent (US Census Bureau, 2015). When the decision was taken to demolish the public housing projects, it was well known that not all residents would qualify for vouchers and not all property owners would be willing to

rent to those who did qualify. Therefore, the issue of poverty and citizens capacity to afford some of the mixed income developments or shelter of any kind was a major question. Managers at the Atlanta Housing Authority argued that the “AHA and its private sector development partners will impact the economic viability by securing public resources that leverage private investment in AHA’s developments and the surrounding community.” The AHA appears to be oblivious to how the private sector developers tend to work. The incentives to build housing for low-income people are quite different from those associated with constructing upper income housing developments.

The continuing inadequate stock of mixed income housing creates challenges for important sectors within the Atlanta workforce, including teachers, police, and firefighters. In addition, the economic crisis intensified housing affordability, leading to one of the worst affordable housing crisis ever. Poor families living below the poverty line who are renting often experience “housing debt,” i.e., spending of more than 30 percent of their income on housing. In fact, during the period 1991 – 2013, the percentage of families renting that were paying more than half of their income on housing grew from 21 percent to 30 percent. This situation puts poor people, especially poor Black women, at risk of eviction and homelessness. Once evicted, residents carry those judgments with them for years, making it difficult to secure decent housing in safe neighborhoods. Working class and some middle class Black families, who may have been caught up in the subprime mortgage schemes, also found themselves facing housing debt and foreclosures when banks and mortgage companies reset those predatory loans. Fulton and DeKalb counties, where the city of Atlanta is located, constituted the epic center of the foreclosure crisis in Georgia.

Given the high rates of poverty and a median sales price for homes in Atlanta of \$ 268,000 (from June 2015 to September 2015), affordable housing is out of the question for a large segment of the African American population. Sales prices have appreciated 155 percent over the last five years and, according to the Atlanta Regional Council, in Atlanta “luxurious, large homes affordable to 10% of the population were overbuilt, so while there are a lot of housing units available now they are not affordable to everyone,” especially not when the city’s income inequality levels are more than twice the national average (Blau, 2015). The race and class dynamic should be underscored here. Median house values are typically lower in more diverse census tracts. According to Pooley, “within the city of Atlanta, the typical median value in majority White census tracts was roughly three to five times the typical median value.” The chart below highlights this reality.

Median House Values, Atlanta, 2011

Segregated White	\$ 648,570
Majority White	\$ 360,740
Integrated	\$ 253,113
Majority Black	\$ 128,311
Segregated Black	\$ 130,818

Source: Pooley 2015

Fading from Black to White: The Racial Transformation of Atlanta in the 21st Century

Atlanta's population had been declining in the 1970s and 1980s, although the African American share had been growing during those same decades. In the 1990s, the city's population began to grow. That growth was not in the African American population, however. Robert Varner, author of *Inside the Perimeter*, argues that this reversal was not spontaneous. He suggests that the influx of White in-town gentrifiers is linked to their recruitment to come to the city and region through the promise of tax abatements and other financial incentives (Varner, 2010).

Varner's view is supported by the facts. Census figures show Atlanta moving from a 67 percent African American majority city in 1990 to a 61 percent Black city in 2000 and to a 54 percent Black city in 2010. Between 2000 and 2010, the share of the population composed of Whites mushroomed from approximately 30 percent to close to 40 percent, a growth rate that more than doubled the increase between 1990 and 2000 (US Census Bureau, 2015).

This growth was not in general, but in specific areas. In order to appreciate the magnitude of the change, the level of residential segregation in Atlanta has to be laid out. In Atlanta, the Northwest, Southwest, and Southeast sections of the city are overwhelmingly Black, approximately 92 percent in 2010, whereas, Buckhead and Northeast Atlanta are overwhelmingly White, approximately 80 percent (Pooley, 2015).

The most pronounced population change has come in the predominantly Black populated areas of the Northwest and Southeast, as well as parts of the Southwest. White population growth, on the other hand, has been most pronounced in East Atlanta, Grant Park, Ormewood Park, and Benteen Park. In those areas the Black population decreased from 57 percent to 38.0 percent, while the White population rose from 36.5 percent to 54.8 percent. In the Edgewood,

Kirkwood, and East Lake neighborhoods, the Black population decreased from 86.2 percent to 58.7 percent, and the White population rose from 11.3 percent to 40 percent. Finally, in west Midtown the White population rose from 49.3 percent to 59.2 percent, with the Black population dropping from 36.5 percent to 23.9 percent (Creative Loafing, 2015).

New Developments and the Atlanta Development Model

At the same time the city was eliminating all its housing projects, it was supporting several new developments that would change the face of the city forever. Furthermore, the city was adopting laws referred to by some advocates as “poor codes” that appeared to criminalize the poor. Below are three examples worthy of attention.

Atlantic Station

Atlantic Station, located in the west Midtown section of Atlanta, presents itself as a city within a city. In fact, it is advertised as being a national model for smart growth and sustainable development. The \$2 billion project is projected as being a “community with unsurpassed architectural quality, middle-income, and up-scale housing with world-class restaurants, theaters, and retailers” (Atlantic Station Website, 2015).

The Environmental Protection Agency in the George W. Bush administration approved the property as a safe site for construction in December 2001. The area, once inhibited by steel mills, is the largest remediation of a brownfield in the United States. According to the *New York Times*, it took \$250 million of infrastructure investment in roads, sewers, and utility lines before construction of building could begin in 2002 (Brown, 2006). Atlantic Station is composed of three distinct areas. They are a town center, called the District, where commercial, retail and

lofts are located; the Commons, a high-rise residential building; and the Village, a low-rise housing area made up of townhomes and single family homes (Atlantic Station Website, 2015).

Real estate prices within Atlantic Station places it outside of the affordability range for most citizens living in Atlanta. For example, the average listing prices for condos and townhomes range from \$395,500 to \$439,000, while the average listing prices for a single family home is between \$454,933 and \$524,900 (Atlantic Station Website, 2015). Needless to say the proportion of African Americans living in Atlantic station is extremely low.

The BeltLine

The BeltLine is fundamentally altering the city. Designed to connect a series of parks and trails, the Beltline is an official City of Atlanta project that functions as a nonprofit corporations. According to its website, “The Atlanta BeltLine is the most comprehensive transportation and economic development effort ever undertaken in the City of Atlanta and among the largest, most wide-ranging urban redevelopment programs currently underway in the United States. The Atlanta BeltLine is a sustainable redevelopment project that will provide a network of public parks, multi-use trails, and transit along a historic 22-mile railroad corridor circling downtown and connecting many neighborhoods directly to each other” (Beltline Website, 2015).

In order to fund the BeltLine project, the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) was asked to provide some of the land it owned and to loan the project start-up funding that was supposed to be repaid. To date the managers of the BeltLine have refused to repay the APS the total amount owed and have argued that they would like to renegotiate the terms of repayment. The

relationship to the APS from the point of view of the BeltLine managers is explained on the website in the following manner. “In 2009, the Atlanta BeltLine TAD (tax allocation district) agreement with Atlanta Public Schools was amended. The first payment to Atlanta Public Schools was postponed to 2013 and the payment schedule was modified. The first payment of \$1.95 million has been made. Subsequent payments have been suspended due to ongoing negotiations” (Beltline Website, 2015). In the last budget it shared with the city council, BeltLine did not include any provisions for repayment to the APS. Unfortunately, the APS does not have any champions to demand repayment, largely due to the test cheating scandal that rocked the city in 2014.

The controversial project has been supported by several high profile Black community leaders. The overwhelming majority of the promised low income dwellings, however, have yet to be developed. This omission should not be surprising. As the recruitment advertisement below for the creative class suggest, the BeltLine is a project that is part and parcel of an effort that reads “let’s flip this city.” Two examples taken directly from the Atlanta BeltLine’s website will suffice. “The Atlanta BeltLine project has been making great headway over the last few years, so if you are thinking of purchasing a home or investment property, you may want to consider one of the following neighborhoods that are on or near the up and coming Beltline” (Beltline Website, 2015).

Of course, many of those featured neighborhoods were once predominantly African American communities. A second advertisement reads as follows: “The Atlanta BeltLine Housing Initiative Program (HIP) is designed to give *qualified families* the opportunity to buy or renovate homes along the trails, parks, and future transit of the Atlanta BeltLine. Eligible

homebuyers could receive up to 25% or \$ 45,000 for a down payment. *Eligible homeowners* could receive up to \$25,000 to make needed repairs to keep their home warm, safe and dry. This program is brought to you by a partnership between Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta and Atlanta BeltLine” (Beltline website, 2015).When compared to the systematic destruction of public housing in the city of Atlanta, the intent of the policy makers and managers of projects like the BeltLine is clear. It says to the Black working class, we’re going to move you out with vouchers and higher housing prices, and move Whites in, a good percentage of whom happen to be gay or lesbian, with tax abatements and housing subsidies. Kathy Woodward, the former chair of the Atlanta City Council and an open lesbian, was the first executive director of the BeltLine. Woodward has already announced her candidacy for mayor of Atlanta in 2017.

Anti-panhandling Ordinances

In “the city too busy to hate” and the home of the modern civil rights movement, the idea that it is illegal to beg sounds like an oxymoron. In September 2012, however, the City of Atlanta passed a controversial bill that would have given people begging for money a mandatory six months sentence in jail for a first offense (McWilliams, 2012). Poor people who were begging would also go to jail for following or walking alongside the solicited person, using profane or abusive language, or touching the solicited person. That bill was so controversial and potentially damaging to the city’s image that Mayor Reed, who is no friend of the homeless, decided to veto the legislation.

Councilmember Michael Julian Bond, son of the late civil rights movement leader Julian Bond, had been the author of the legislation. Following the mayor’s veto, Bond and others introduced a new piece of legislation that prohibits panhandlers from continuing to ask for

money after they have been told no. Similar to the anti-panhandling ordinances of 1995 and 2005, the 2012 legislation makes illegal begging within 15 feet of ATM machines and pay boxes for parking lots.. It also makes begging for money within 15 feet of a building entrance or exit illegal, and unlike the past ordinances that were focused on the central business district, the new ordinance covers the entire city (McWilliams, 2012).

Punishment under the new legislation makes the first conviction 30 days of community service and the second conviction a mandatory sentence of 30 days in jail. A third offense would result in a mandatory 90 days in jail. In addition, the new legislation also makes it an offense to say or do anything that would make a “reasonable person” feel threatened in any way. The Atlanta City Council was passed this legislation. Councilwoman Keisha Bottoms said of the legislation, “It addresses the concerns the public has about public safety and also allows us to take a compassionate approach to panhandling. This not only allows us to enforce panhandling ordinance. It also increases the penalties.” Councilman Bond is quoted as having said, “the legislation protects Atlanta’s citizens from wolves cloaking themselves in sheep’s clothing.” (McWilliams, 2012).

Another Insult to Black Atlanta: King Arthur’s Castle and the Mean Spirited Mayor

The story of the new Atlanta Falcons stadium is symbolic of the contemporary position African American working class people occupy within the city. The new Atlanta Falcons stadium, which will cost over \$ 1.2 billion, has been dubbed “King Arthur’s Castle” by residents in some of the affected neighborhoods. Arthur Blank, the owner of Home Depot, and the builder of the Georgia Aquarium, is also the owner of the Atlanta Falcons football team. A few years ago he let it be known that he wanted a new stadium, although the Georgia Dome –the current

home of the Falcons—is only 20 years old and a sought after sight for all types of sporting and religious events.

The original plan called for the destruction of the Dome and the building of a new state of the art stadium with support from the state of Georgia. When negative reactions came from conservative legislators regarding the proposed use of state funds for private purposes, Blank turned to the City of Atlanta and Mayor Kasim Reed. Reed promised a public conversation on the stadium, but according to observers, the decision to support the stadium project was done in anything but a transparent manner. Yet the mayor decided to present a 200 page proposal to the City Council on a day when the item wasn't even on the agenda. No public notice was given that a vote would be taken and therefore there was no public input. Nevertheless, the council passed the mayor's plan to provide \$200 million dollars in bonds to support the construction of Blank's stadium, 11-4.

After months of acrimonious debate, and insensitive and demeaning public statements about religious leaders by Mayor Reed, including threats of using eminent domain to take the property of the two historic Black churches, an agreement was finally reached with the city. One of the churches was formerly pastored by actor Jasmine Guy's father and was the original site of Spelman College. Nevertheless, immediately following the announcement of the agreement, the Atlanta City Council promptly approved a nonbinding \$30 million Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) and adopted a proposal creating a committee responsible for overseeing the stadium development programs for local residents. The CBA had been supported by organized labor and Georgia Stand-up, an activist alliance that promotes CBAs as a method of ensuring public participation in such large construction projects.

According to *Creative Loafing*, that oversight committee includes representatives from the following institutions and organizations: Atlanta's City Council, Mayor's Office, Human Resource Department of the City, Invest Atlanta, Vine City Neighborhood Association, English Avenue Neighborhood Association, Castleberry Hill Neighborhood Association, Atlanta Workforce Development Agency, and the North Georgia Building Construction and Trades Council (Blau, 2013). All decisions regarding use of the proposed funds related to the community benefits agreement, however, will be determined by the Arthur Blank Foundation and Invest Atlanta, the city's development arm.

One of the main complaints of community leaders, including firebrand State Representative "Able" Mable Thomas, who is also a longtime resident of Vine City, was that the \$30 million Community Benefits Agreement is *nonbinding* and therefore not legally enforceable. Thomas argued that the approval of the mayor's plan to use city funds, the agreement, and oversight committee amounted to a clever way to destroy what remains of Vine City because the proposed CBA would become another of the broken promises made to Black working class people (Thomas, 2015). Despite community protests, by agreeing to the CBA, the image conscious city was able to move forward in an easier manner with providing the \$200 million in bonds to help build Blank's stadium.

Vine City is a historically important part of the city. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King lived in the area in a modest home for years. Vine City was also where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) met to take its decision to become an all-Black organization and to move away from its previous five years of Black and White membership. Finally, in the Vine City area a riot that was blamed on the newly elected SNCC Chairman,

Stokely Carmichael, broke out after police had shot an African American believed to have been a suspected car thief. The 1966 riot shattered the image of Atlanta as “the city too busy to hate.”

Today the median income of Vine City’s residents is well below the poverty line, and approximately 43 percent of the housing units in the area are vacant. Parts of Vine City, such as “the bluff,” are well-known drug dealing areas. At the same time, the Vine City area is strategically situated between Georgia Institute of Technology, the southern part of downtown Atlanta, and the Atlanta University Center. In other words it is an extremely valuable section of the city. Therefore, the location of the new stadium is designed to facilitate a cluster effect with the stadium being the hub of the convention and entertainment district. It would be connected with the CNN Center, Philips Arena, Georgia World Congress Center, Centennial Olympic Park, the College Football Hall of Fame, Coca Cola, the Civil and Human Rights Museum, the Atlanta Aquarium, and the central business district. The stadium’s location prevents Martin Luther King Jr. Drive from running through downtown to the end of the city limit at Fulton Industrial Boulevard. It was located in the middle of what was Martin Luther King Jr. Drive and Northside Drive (Ruch, 2014). In symbolic terms nothing could be clearer – when it comes to poor Black folks, connectivity is not a concern because they are not wanted or welcomed downtown.

African Americans and the New City

The Atlanta Regional Commission’s plan for the Atlanta metro region in 2040 has outlined several notable goals under the title Winning the Future. These goals include: 1) developing a world class infrastructure defined by a comprehensive transportation network and a secured long-term water supply; 2) creating a competitive economy based on a highly desirable workforce able to meet the needs of twenty-first century employers and through building the

region as a globally recognized hub of technology and innovation; and 3) developing healthy livable communities by promoting health, arts and other aspects of a high quality life, and by developing additional walkable vibrant centers that support people of all ages and abilities (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2015).

While not explicitly laying it out, the assumptions undergirding the Winning The Future report imply that there is an understanding that there will be the continuation of a market-driven development model that gives rise to policies that reproduce racialized poverty and inequality, support for neighborhood displacement due to an aggressive and intentional gentrification, and an outward appearance of a tolerant, progressive city, but one that in practice puts forth ordinances, or poor codes, that criminalize the poor and ignore the root causes of homelessness in the city.

Designing and realizing a new city based on the vision of the White corporate elite in the global era is well underway. The problem that remains is how to deal with poor Blacks, who are mostly women and children living in poverty, without igniting simmering racial tensions that will tarnish the well-constructed image of Atlanta.

Conclusion

Gentrification in Atlanta is directly connected to the regional development process that seeks to attract the “creative class” to the metropolitan area. Gentrification in Atlanta reinforces racial inequality and economic marginalization and precipitates the persistent poverty and housing segregation experienced by African Americans. The logic of the regime politics and policy prescriptions put forth have consistently been focused on implementing a vision of

Atlanta that does not include the Black poor. That vision is one generated by White corporate elites and implemented by their junior partners --Black politicians.

The market driven development model cannot address the historically generated problems of poverty and racial discrimination associated with a segmented labor market, residential segregation, and a two tiered educational system. Progressive policy options are necessary to provide equal opportunity and to protect the dignity of the poor and low income citizens. Intervention by city government is possible, and some municipal policies have been developed around the country to put a brake on the out of control gentrification. For example, the City of Atlanta could use its power of the purse to acquire properties and turn them into affordable housing units, as was done in the past. Political will has to exist among those who tout Atlanta as a progressive city, especially Black politicians.

Additionally, the idea that it is only the so-called creative class that can contribute new ideas and therefore should be pursued and recruited to move to Atlanta is inherently wrong and openly racist. A casual reading of the historical record will show that it has been the Black working class that has made tremendous contributions to the cultural development of the country and most cities, including Atlanta. Moreover, the logic of the creative class would have even excluded working class personalities such as Thomas Edison.

The dream weavers and image makers continue to promote myths similar to that of “a city too busy to hate” in the midst of widespread suffering, poverty, and marginalization on one end of the pole, and wealth and opulence at the other end. This makes the betrayal of African American interests by Black politicians for low bribes and intrigue shameful. The future of African Americans in the City of Atlanta is far from certain. If current trends continue, however,

Atlanta will have a very European city character, i.e., the rich are located in the city center and poor folks are spread throughout the suburbs. Before he was assassinated, Dr. King said “we have some difficult days ahead.” For the Black poor and working class in Atlanta, those days are here.

The type of policy interventions needed to slow down or reverse the out of control gentrification process currently unfolding in Atlanta requires new change agents, elected and unelected, who are committed to pro-poor policy prescriptions and a social movement that will begin to challenge the dominant development model and regime politics of the governing coalition.

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