SECESSION DEMOCRACY:

GEOGRAPHIES OF WHITENESS, PROPERTY, AND BOUNDARY WORK

BEYOND BUCKHEAD CITY

by

COLEMAN A. ALLUMS

(Under the Direction of Steve Holloway)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation tracks the attempted secession of the Buckhead community from the City of Atlanta. This movement would see a white, wealthy, northern corner of the City de-annexed and reincorporated as a distinct municipality. In addition to removing crucial tax revenue from broader popular control and worsening racial inequality and segregation, Buckhead City—as the newly-incorporated city would be called—threatens to collapse the bond rating of every city in the state. Probing the foundations of secessionist discourse, developing racial capitalist readings of property, critiquing descriptive accounts of urban boundary change, and tracking the ongoing negotiation between hegemonic neoliberalism and emergent authoritarianism in urban governance, this work reads the movement for Buckhead City as part of a broader secession democracy in the United States, one which does not (cannot) undergird universal self-determination and collective freedom but rather reproduces exclusive and possessive geographies of whiteness.

INDEX WORDS: Whiteness, Democracy, Property, Secession

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DEDICATION

To Carol and Caroline, again and always.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the dislocating chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic, Atlanta began to fall apart.

But perhaps this is too passive a beginning, too gentle a lie to lead us into the work at hand. The truth of Atlanta's plight in pandemic time is that certain forces sought its unmaking. As with much of American politics in the last half decade, this story might be best introduced with a tweet.

On June 3, 2021, Bill White—who serves as the Trumpian figurehead for the Buckhead City movement—gleefully annotates a shared link to a conservative news blog: "Crime wave sparks BUCKHEAD CITY movement in Atlanta." A proud defector from Hillary Clinton in 2012 to Donald Trump in the 2016 election, it is perhaps no surprise that White himself enacts a sort of pastiche of his idol's idiosyncratic style. If we scour White's Twitter timeline for prior mentions of Buckhead City, only three emerge. Two of these offer links to mainstream news stories on the particulars of the Buckhead City movement, its detractors, and bureaucratic concerns over implementation. The other reposts what appears to be an Instagram story touting a total $550,000 raised from a 150-person launch event and calling upon the Mayor of Atlanta to work with Buckhead as an eventual—inevitable—municipal partner.

The Buckhead City Committee (BCC)—formerly the Buckhead Exploratory Committee—of which White is both Chairman and CEO (volunteer roles, he is always certain to remind us) offers quite a simple teleology of itself. BCC exists to immanentize

the municipal aspiration for which it is named, to effect a secession from Atlanta. In support of this cause, justifications—such as the aforementioned, ostensible crime wave gripping Atlanta—are given, various grievances (tax equity, corruption) loudly rehearsed. Nevertheless, as with many political programs across scales, one cannot shake the sense that with respect to Buckhead City, the platform matters less than—and, indeed, becomes—the securing and maintenance of power by particular interests at the exclusion and expense of others. Buckhead becomes its own cause.

Buckhead, since at least the early 20th century, has been the cultural and economic home of white, urban Atlanta (Barnard, 2009; Connor, 2015; Hankins et al., 2012). Historically, as downtown housed the commercial and political activities of this elite cadre, Buckhead housed its families, its accumulated treasures, its dreams. Buckhead's invocation among long-tenured Atlantans calls to mind grand mansions, verdant avenues, high-end retail, luxury dining and diversion (Barnard, 2009; Durrett, 2014)—an idyllic image which residents and institutions are keen to (re)claim. The cachet of Buckhead was always inherent in its exclusions; in seceding, Buckhead City seeks to codify and materialize these as never before.

But Buckhead was not always part of Atlanta. Its annexation in the 1950s was part of a broader project to temper anxieties around waxing Black political power in the City Too Busy to Hate. Anxiety around the implications of an impending majority-Black electorate and the desire to uphold a white supremacist social order in the city spurred city and state leaders to pursue "a spatial fix to thwart black political power" (Connor, 2015, p. 442). This fix took the form of Black vote dilution via the annexation of Buckhead, a project which was realized in 1951 by an act of the state legislature. Interestingly, this focus

on choosing voters as a viable technology of white hegemonic power itself prefigures the fundamental logics of the new secession movement as well as broader trends in repressive state politics in Georgia and elsewhere (see, e.g., Bitzer, 2021; Hajnal, Lejevardi, & Nielson, 2017).

The Buckhead community sits roughly in the northern third of the City of Atlanta, just south of the City of Sandy Springs.

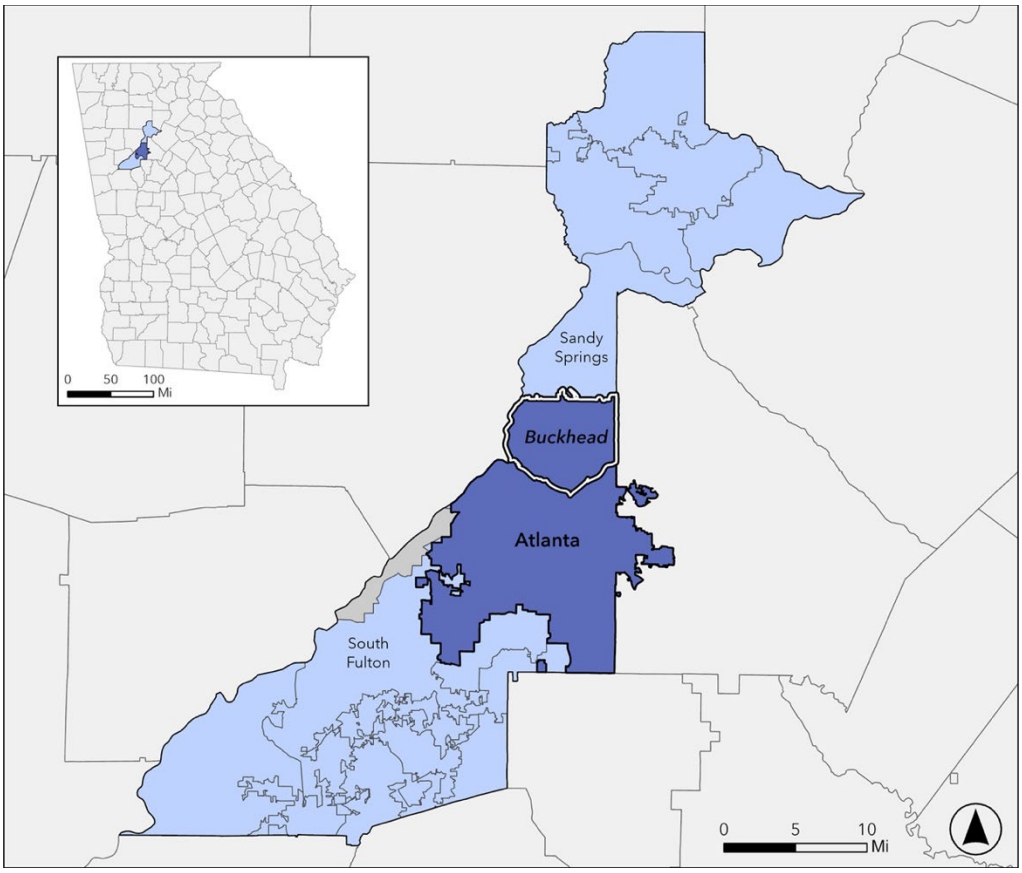

Figure 1.1 Map of Fulton County with Buckhead and Atlanta highlighted, other new cities labeled

It is home to approximately 100,000 residents, of whom close to 2/3 are white, a proportion which differs substantially from the remainder of the city (Ruch, 2020). Indeed, the City of Atlanta—even including Buckhead's large white community—is roughly 50% Black;

almost 2/3 of the city is non-white. Median home values in Buckhead almost double those across the larger city, while the median earner in Buckhead brings home over $100,000 per year (Ruch, 2020). It is home to a large and still growing commercial district and boasts the largest shopping mall in the southeastern US (Durrett, 2014).

Figure 1.2 Highway exit for historic Lenox Road, with Buckhead commercial buildings in background

While other areas in the metro (one thinks of Decatur, East Atlanta Village, the Beltline, even far-flung Alpharetta) may boast newer amenities and attractions, hipper restaurants, and better bars, the cultural and commercial heart of Atlanta remains in Buckhead—even if only by symbolic inertia.

Fundamental to this entire exercise is the fact that the making of cities is zero-sum, rival. In other words, that which one city possesses or directs—in territory, commercial development, or political power—another city cannot. This, perhaps more so than any other single fact, orients the attitude of this work towards the long shadow of the City of Buckhead. A 2021 report in the Atlanta Journal Constitution (Capelouto & Peebles, 2021)

more precisely articulates the stakes of the potential de-annexation and secession of Buckhead. The City of Buckhead, as currently proposed, would "take nearly 20% of Atlanta's population and become the 10th largest city in Georgia" while also removing "about 40% of the assessed value of the city of Atlanta's property off the books." The resulting city would be around 75% white, which would make it even whiter than well-known, exclusive enclaves like Johns Creek and Sandy Springs. As one leader of the resistance to Buckhead secession told me, "[i]t doesn't take much, much analysis to see that forming a city that's 78% white out of a city that's majority African American is going…to change things substantially."

Such a change is not simply ocular or cultural but also economic and, of course, political. Indeed, Buckhead City would have the second highest median income of any city in the state. Also at stake is considerable property tax revenue. The AJC report (Capelouto & Peebles, 2021) finds that assessed value of all the real estate in Atlanta currently totals nearly $35 billion, according to Fulton County Tax Assessor's data. About 41% of that — over $14 billion — is in Buckhead. With its high-end shopping offerings, Buckhead has always had a strong commercial tax base; the most valuable piece of property is popular Lenox Square mall, valued at nearly $400 million by the county.

A recent study by opposition groups in Atlanta finds similar risks to the City of Atlanta and the broader region as "secession would lead to a net fiscal loss somewhere between $80 million to $116 million annually, with even more money lost for Atlanta schools" (Mock, 2021b, para. 24). The loss of such valuable commercial and residential property could quite literally collapse the City of Atlanta, further diluting Black political and economic power in an increasingly fractured landscape. An opponent of Buckhead

City contends that Buckhead secession, in addition to being ineffectual, would prove disastrous not just for the City of Atlanta but for the metropolitan region and the state as a whole:

> What bothers me is…[t]o take the step of allowing a part of a city that has been instrumental in allowing that city to fund improvements in the area and [is implicated in] bonding and pension obligations and infrastructure that has been—that you borrowed against future tax dollars…The complications are just so damn enormous compared to the chance of being able to do something to address what you say is the reason for wanting to split up.

Due to shared bond debt, Buckhead secession could not only wreck the bond rating of the City of Atlanta itself but also—by setting precedent around secession from an existing city—has the potential also to destroy the bond rating of every city in the state of Georgia (Mock, 2021b; Pendered, 2018; Ruch, 2021). Moody's has warned that such secessions are "credit negative for local governments in Georgia generally because they establish a precedent that the state can act to divide local tax bases, potentially lowering the credit quality of one city for the benefit of another" (Pendered, 2018, para. 6).

Secession more broadly continues to have significant implications for racial equity and spatial justice. Indeed, other possibilities and certainties for harm will percolate through the later chapters of this dissertation; for now, let us say simply that the implications for those left behind in a Buckhead deannexation—the less wealthy and the less white of the City of Atlanta, of course, but also the broader metro region and the state itself—would be immediate and substantial across multiple valences.

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In the midst of the Buckhead movement, a parallel secessionary impulse emerged from the stinking morass that comprises reactionary white democracy (Olson, 2004; 2001) at the federal level. US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (coincidentally, also of Georgia) advocated for a national divorce between so-called red and blue states, arguing that (largely white) conservatives need 'safe spaces' away from the ostensibly radical, multi-racial, cosmopolitanism of progressives. One does not need to squint hard in order to see the outlines of the Confederate secession implicit in such a vision. Yet the link between such political visions and the narrower politics of the new secession is also stronger than one might imagine. Indeed, Michan Connor (2023, para. 3) argues that

> [a]s Greene was becoming a parent, homeowner and business executive in north Fulton, White residents were revolting over property taxes and launching a suburban secessionist movement — with considerable success. In this context, Greene's endorsement of a geographic "divorce" makes more sense. Greene saw how such an idea could forge a political community and spawn a successful brand of politics that protected the interests of conservative White homeowners.

In addition to this widely mocked plan for a national divorce, Greene has publicly supported the Buckhead City movement despite representing a rural district many miles away. Indeed, this support for the Buckhead movement by a transparently-motivated white identarian (indeed—apparently—white separatist) politician is perhaps more telling than any analysis I might offer herein.

The Argument & A Plan for the Work

Despite our opening salvo, this dissertation is not about Buckhead or Marjorie Taylor Green. Or, rather, it is not *only* or even *primarily* about such things. Rather, it is a culmination of almost a decade of uninterrupted research on the logics, discourses, practices, and spaces of secession. Speaking to such diverse problems as self-determination, social obligation, distributional politics, democratic institutions, and racial *ressintement*, the practice of secession is a uniquely salient and evocative mirror for the present moment, one which reflects the various symptoms and lingering malignancies of the post-Trump United States. This timeliness is one reason I have made such careful study of its contours. Another is that secession is boring.

I'll ask the reader to bear with me here. One of the difficulties of parsing the thing we might call structural racism in the United States—of communicating its nature, function, and import to broader publics—is that, in its being structural, the violent reproduction and ordering of racial difference tends to accumulate and fester in banal places (see Gilmore, 2002; Pulido, 2016; 2017). Homeownership, for instance, tends to be regarded as a matter of personal finance, an individual negotiation of price and value towards housing security, mediated by the potential for generally modest capital gains. It is the site for bourgeois squabbles over homestead exemptions, petty conflicts around zoning ordinances, and private aesthetic jealousies. It is also, though, the main instrument through which any sort of social security in old age or infirmity is realized in the US. As Highsmith (2020, para. 12) argues,

> [t]he weapons that perpetuate the structural harms of municipal hoarding do not appear on our screens in the same visceral way. They take the form of a regressive

> property tax limitation, not a semi-automatic; a municipal charter, rather than a handgun. But we must understand these routine tools of racial exclusion as brutal violence just the same.

While critical scholars of housing know that there is a vast racial appreciation gap in real estate (Markley et al. 2021), that home appraisal values are mediated by the race of the seller (Howell & Korver-Glenn, 2018; Korver-Glenn, 2018), that efforts to build Black wealth through homeownership have largely backfired (Markley et al., 2021), for most people the home remains at best a personal aspiration and, at the median, a necessary and expensive inconvenience. How does one convince a person for whom homeownership largely consists of replacing an infinite series of blown light bulbs that the material significance of race in the United States today has more to do with faceless appraisers and mortgage brokers than with Klan members?

Yet it is precisely by this banality—by this boring, technical drudgery—that racial inequality is reproduced so effectively. As the historian of science Lee Vinsel (2017; Vinsel & Russell, 2020) argues, it is in such drudgery, the routine maintenance and repair of systems that power and permanence inhere. In the abstract, such mundanities as municipal boundaries, commercial tax obligations, public service provision, and zoning ordinances suggest a hell of local government tedium. As I hope to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, though, it is precisely the automaticity, the technocracy, the vulgar economism of such concerns which constitute the unquestioned and unquestionable foundations or grounds from which subjects, ideas, social relations, and politics are authorized. In this, I follow Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Chantel Mouffe, Cornel West, and others who insist

that the genealogies of sense, practice, and relation which structure such foundations are the necessary starting point for an effective social analysis of the phenomena themselves.

Building from such perspectives, I contend that the logics and spaces of secession are interesting and worthy of study because they betray the constitutive background—and boundaries—of liberal democratic practice writ large. As Josh Inwood (2023) has convincingly argued, we find ourselves confronted with a moment where the broad, inclusive liberalism of the Civil Rights era and the flattening economistic universality of the neoliberal project have begun to fall in the face of resurgent, counterrevolutionary white nationalisms. In this moment wherein the loudest voices of reactionary whiteness delight, indeed exalt (Luger, 2022), in the cruelty of performative reaction against any germ of cosmopolitan progress, we must also listen to the quiet rhythms of violence and exclusion which form the effective counterpoint.

Thus, my central contention herein: that secession reproduces a democracy against the broader *demos*, what I will call a secession democracy, which is to say that it articulates to a set of exclusionary political economic and territorial practices and logics authorized under nominally democratic intercourse (what I will call actually-existing democracy) and in the wake of [neo]liberal, racialized regimes of property. In this, I take direction from W.E.B. du Bois (1935/1998, 1920/2016, 1906, 1903/2003), who saw such practices as fundamental to the broader projects of whiteness and white hegemony which emanate from even the foundational moments of the nation, who diagnosed so cogently the spaces and logics of whiteness as a material force in American politics, who bore witness to the slogging successes and revisions of such efforts within the violent conjunctures of Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Du Bois, too, found diagnostic utility in the practice of

secession, linking the reproduction of what he termed the colorline to the violent reterritorializations of Confederate secession and post-Reconstruction reclamation. It is this analytic urgency, this radically geographic perspective on the vagaries of white possession and abandonment which I attempt to recall in the pages that follow.

My argument is not simply that American democracy won't save us—others have convincingly argued this point before (see Davis, 2000; Kelley, 2002). It's that actually-existing democracy, secession democracy if you will—shot through with the logics, values, and common senses of racial capitalism—is the source of the inequities which vex us so thoroughly. Arshad Isakjee and colleagues (see Isakjee et al., 2020; Davies & Isakjee, 2019; Davies et al., 2017) have convincingly demonstrated how liberal democracy, despite its sedate self-image, necessarily and intuitively produces exclusions and violences, particularly along a racialized boundary. My argument tracks such interventions closely, while reorienting our scalar focus particularly towards the local.

Thus, each of the following chapters deals with some foundational element of the discourse and practice of secession democracy, some sanctioning object or relation, some contingent ground upon which claims might be anchored. There are, of course, convergences and repetitions in such a practice, but these are never total, never identical, never mutually completing. Refusing the scientistic rigidity of the conventional dissertation form—which would render as separable (indeed, as separate) the artifacts, theories, discourses, and desires that constitute this work—these essays form a variegated coherence around their shared targets; they aim, each in its own way, at nothing less than the possibilizing foundations of secession democracy (of boundary work, of the new secession).

In this I rely upon a diverse cast of theoretical interlocutors, some of whom have already emerged in the foregoing pages: Chantelle Mouffe, Cornel West, W.E.B. Du Bois, Joel Olson, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon. Each forms a distinct node within a broader diagnostic constellation, each provides some distinct leverage. My contention is that by encountering and mutually [un]grounding (Landau et al., 2021; Landau & Pohl, 2023) the new secession, boundary work, and liberal democracy through such thinkers—that is, by unsettling the foundations that license human activity as and under these structures—we can arrive at an account which comprises a coherent demarcation of secession democracy, a goal which threatens not only Buckhead City as a distinct political project but also the broader logics of possession (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and dispossession which structure the fitful, uneven exercise of racial capitalist spatial politics.

Chapter 2 begins the effort with an account of my own history studying secession and, thereby, an overview of Atlanta's new secession itself since 2005. I then account for the broad problematics within which my work intervenes. These are Race, Democracy, and (Urban) Political Economy, each of which I elucidate towards a broader contextualization of the work to come. Then, I discuss the particular conceptual apparatus by which I realize this intervention before concluding with an in-depth abstract of the prior constellation of work that I have produced (and will produce) on and around the question of secession. From this point forward, each chapter excepting the final is constructed as a distinct journal-length essay, with the ultimate aim that they will be submitted as such, each to the journal indicated on its particular cover page.

In Chapter 3, the first of these essays, I spend some time thinking alongside W.E.B. du Bois, refashioning his conceptualization of the veil to challenge conventional accounts—within urban studies, political science, and geography—of boundary change. In this sense, the chapter reflects a post-foundational process of thinking with theory, a practice of isolating and iterating on a particular element of du Bois' thought in order to elucidate the contingent conceptual foundations of contemporary scholarship on boundary change. Here, I establish the conceptual shape of boundary work as both diagnostic and explanatory of a broad set of empirical cases, though most especially the new secession. This deployment of boundary work is grounded in a racial capitalist reading of the dialectics of the veil, one which encounters and produces white and Black worlds as mutually antagonistic yet materially interdependent, a perspective which challenges conventional accounts of boundary change. I build on emergent work on the possessive geographies of white supremacy (as, e.g., in Bonds, 2020; Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Inwood, 2018; Pulido et al., 2019). This literature advances possessive geographies as a conceptual tool for analyzing those material spaces which are co-produced alongside the logics of possession (Lipsitz, 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and relations of property (Harris, 1993) that structure the exercise of whiteness under racial capitalism. I then revisit the urban history of Atlanta from this new conceptual perspective, thinking with and articulating a constellation of discrete moments by which this approach might be instantiated.

In Chapter 4, I produce a postfoundational reading of the urban political economy of secession, focusing particularly on the constitutive role of taxpaying with respect to the possessive geographies of whiteness under racial capitalism. This chapter follows Sundell

(2021) and others in reading property as a contingent foundation of capitalist political economy; I link this claim back to the discourses and practices of the new secession as well as broader genealogies of race and taxation, focusing particularly on the period of Reconstruction. I then consider two authorizing practices of the new secession in Atlanta: the feasibility study and the referendum. I give a detailed overview of the technical process of municipal incorporation in Georgia, highlighting particularly the licensing role that these two elements play in any secession movement, demonstrating how such elements convincingly mimic—yet ultimately subvert—justice and self-determination. I then tackle the problem of scale. Following Purcell (2006; see also Born & Purcell, 2006) and others, I attempt to pierce the fetishized veil of the local, which asserts its necessary preferability to other scales. I argue that scale cannot be interpreted in such an essentialist manner and provide a contextual counterargument, suggesting a more immediate genesis for the local preference in the new secession.

At this point, the dissertation [re]turns towards the singular figure of Buckhead. Chapter Five thus begins by thinking with Walter Benjamin's phantasmagoria, using the concept to construct a spectral geography of Buckhead in different moments of reification, bringing to the fore those racial capitalist relations and exclusions which link the false synthesis of a singular Buckhead to its "true conditions of existence" (Berdet, 2010, Thesis 1.3). I highlight the repetitions and disruptions within the various dream images which constitute the phantasmagoric totality of Buckhead, probing the foundations that undergird its enforced cohesion—my aim here is to show the various lines of flight out from a coherent Buckhead in order to disrupt recent claims that threats to its supposed-essential nature must be met with the force of secession. I then turn to the issue of authoritarian

geographies and the role of univocal territorial power—its pursuit, its construction, its exercise—in second-wave secession movements. Focusing particularly on the question of police power, I ponder why Buckhead City is so fixated on territorial control. Building on the work of Frantz Fanon and other psychoanalytic thinkers, I demonstrate how the attempt to produce territorial univocality via secession is inseparable from racialized anxieties around violence, precarity, and meaninglessness under (racial) capitalism.

There is, finally, a coda, wherein the totality of the work is rehearsed. It is here, too, that the full image of secession democracy comes into focus, particularly in its juxtaposition with the promise of abolition democracy. Still, if this final effort altogether fails to satisfy the reader as an act of commencement or even conclusion, I can offer only my own commiseration. Indeed, the only hope on offer here is that of Terry Eagleton (2015): a hope without optimism.

Let us begin.

CHAPTER 2

PREPARATORY NOTES

My work on secession began in earnest in 2015—spurred on, in particular, by the incisive historical and theoretical analysis of Michan Connor (2015; 2014)—just as a true second wave of municipal secession movements in the Atlanta metro area began to coalesce. In the intervening years, I have traced the sometimes contradictory, always bewildering drive for secession across distinct geographic contexts, discursive formations, and theoretical modes (see Allums, 2020; 2017; Allums & Markley, 2020; Allums, Markley, & Hafley, 2021). Secessionary efforts in the State of Georgia proceed largely under the auspices of municipal incorporation. That is, they are efforts at cityhood. Thus, when I invoke the new secession throughout this work, what I precisely intend is the legal, political-economic, and territorial production of a new city out of unincorporated county territory or, more recently, by the de-annexation of existing, already incorporated space. For specificity's sake, I call this conjunctural set of secessionary practices *the new secession.* I will describe in further detail the bounds of this terminology at a later point in this chapter; for now, it is sufficient simply to settle the terminology.

What I attempt to demonstrate throughout this work—among several other core efforts—is that treating the new secession as (only) a banal method of municipal boundary change (as, e.g., in Smith & Debbage, 2011); a conservative, suburban disposition (Kruse, 2005); a neoliberal technique of colorblind privatization (Allums, 2017); or an epiphenomenal symptom of globalization (Keil, 2000) cannot reckon with the emergent

reterritorializations with which this project deals. At one and the same time, I insist that conceptually carving off the new secession in Atlanta from relevant genealogies risks casting individual moments of what I call boundary work (e.g. segregation, secession, white flight, annexation) as aberrative rather than constitutive of a coherent politico-territorial practice of racial capitalism.

After the pathbreaking incorporation of Sandy Springs in 2005—the particulars of which are outlined at multiple points later in this work—there was a relative lull in secession movements seeking to separate from metro county governance, with only occasional referenda and a handful of new cities forming. As I have described above, the state of secession changed rapidly in the second decade of the 2000s. In 2016 for instance there were four cities attempting secession: two eventually incorporated, a third failed its referendum, and the fourth proposal never made it out of the legislature. More recently, movements have emerged which seek to incorporate new cities from existing cities (Allums & Markley, 2020); Buckhead is the current model species of this set.

At the time of this writing, nearly a dozen cities in metro Atlanta have incorporated since the early 00s. These are located predominantly in the northern, white suburbs (see Figure I below), though they are now effectively—if unevenly—dispersed across the metro area. The table below describes their current extent in reverse chronology of incorporation.

Name	**Year of Incorporation**	**County**
Mableton	2022	Cobb
South Fulton	2017	Fulton
Stonecrest	2016	DeKalb

Tucker	2016	DeKalb
Brookhaven	2012	DeKalb
Peachtree Corners	2012	Gwinnett
Dunwoody	2008	DeKalb
Chattahoochee Hills	2007	Fulton
Milton	2006	Fulton
Johns Creek	2006	Gwinnett
Sandy Springs	2005	Fulton

Table 1.1 Atlanta-area municipal incorporations since 2005

There are several more instances of recent cities which have failed in their initial ballot referenda. I refer to some of these in greater or lesser detail in the text of the following pages. In particular, the proposed city of Eagle's Landing—alongside the recently-incorporated City of Stonecrest—will reappear throughout this work for reasons both practical (I have spent some significant time researching these cases) and instrumental (they each effectively illustrate various throughlines and disjunctions in the secession tendency). Other failed secession efforts—including the City of Greenhaven, the City of LaVista Hills, and Milton County—are mentioned briefly in the pages that follow, as is the now defunct City of Chattahoochee Plantation. Most recently in May of 2022, three cities in Cobb County failed in their referenda; a further fourth effort remains with the legislature.

But it is the Buckhead movement that remains our North Star, which spurs the work in this moment. Considered against the patchwork backdrop above, the proposed Buckhead City is, in many respects, simply the latest if also perhaps the boldest expression of the

secessionary impulse (see Allums, Markley, & Hafley, 2021; Connor, 2015) to date: as currently proposed, it would de-annex and then re-incorporate the northernmost territories of the City of Atlanta. Prior secessions (excepting Eagle's Landing, which is as yet unrealized—see Allums & Markley, 2020) have sought to incorporate unincorporated geographies, and none have directly threatened the City of Atlanta itself. The City of Buckhead would attempt both concurrently.

My ongoing academic interest in secession has been driven by several factors. Initially, these manifested—as I imagine projects and ideas do for most of us engaged in this sort of work—as an inarticulable sense that something was off or wrong about cityhood movements. As a long-time resident of Atlanta, I struggled to make sense of the stories being told by secession activists throughout the mid-2010s, struggled to understand how local government was supposed to be the necessary solution to the ostensible problem of local government, struggled to interpret competing claims on a vague ideal of freedom, struggled to decode the sort of blind faith that activists put in the municipal corporation to solve their various problems and complaints, struggled to make sense of the disinterest white activists showed for the externalities all but guaranteed by the potential success of their respective movements. I struggled, too, with the scalar contradictions of democracy: why did the ostensible freedom and self-determination supposedly guaranteed by secession in one place always require the disenfranchisement of marginalized populations and the disassembly of the larger demos? Why was secession almost always deployed as a means to minoritarian power? Finally, I was struck by my constant recognition of such contradictions at the state and national levels, the political echoes of secessionary rhetoric beyond the new secession in things like gerrymandering. After several years puzzling over

these movements, pondering how to interpret and situate their own accounts of themselves, I began, slowly, to realize that the wrongness that called out to me was not only some artifact imminent to the story of secession, but was also always a specter of what was not being said, a reaction to the ways in which such discourses glided, genteel and ever so reasonable, over the tumultuous, violent surface of politics at multiple scales.

Problematics

Secession was and is, at its heart, a project predicated on the subversion of political threats to what Cheryl Harris (1993) calls the "existing state of affairs," which, in the US context, is always-already shot through with the multiple, intersecting valences of whiteness as property and vestigial coloniality (Inwood & Bonds, 2017; Reardon & TallBear, 2012), yet committed always to the myth of its own apolitical neutrality. It thus comprises a paired movement, whereby the logics and spaces of white possession (Bonds, 2020) are [re]produced and, in the same moment, disavowed. As I have progressed through this research program, I have worked from this basic, fundamental position to assimilate a more useful and precise language for the issues that generated that early eeriness, locating these in broader geographic frameworks. Below, I elucidate the problematics within and across which the remainder of the work at hand will amble.

Race

The first and most obvious—and, indeed, the most consistent and thoroughgoing—has been the issue of race. Even a cursory survey of recent movements (see, e.g., Allums, 2017; Mock, 2018; Rosen, 2017) betrays the distinct whiteness of secession; this sense is

emphasized all the more against the multiracial backdrop of the broader metro area.[1] New cities have been consistently and disproportionately white[2] and well-resourced, while the unincorporated remainders have been poorer and disproportionately Black. Any person familiar with the territories around which such movements have consistently articulated could sense the trend, if only from the lived experience of transversing the city and observing its demographic variegations. Despite this clear and obvious disjunction—and Atlanta's complex historical geographies of segregation and displacement—the question of race in secession movements has been repressed and distorted by the hegemony of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Indeed, when Black plaintiffs sued Georgia Governor Nathan Deal for "violating the Voting Rights Act by signing legislation that created five majority-white municipalities in the majority–minority counties of Fulton and DeKalb between 2005 and 2008," the case was dismissed as, technically, any person of any race *could* live in any of the new and proposed cities, a decision undergirded by "formal and color-blind, rather than empirical and race-aware, standards of equity" (Connor, 2015, pp. 436, 441). In other words, since the movements did not claim racial animus as their driving impetus for secession, then racial harm was purely accidental to the entire enterprise and always negligible. Thus, for me, the question of race was made all the more salient in its absence, its repression within the discourses of cityhood (see, e.g., Allums, 2017; 2020).

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[1] Every supporter of cityhood that I have spoken with these years—with the exception of representatives for Stonecrest and the failed city of Greenhaven—has been white. This is not some strange artifact of my methodology, but rather a symptomatic curiosity, an inherent signal in the noise of the movements themselves.

[2] The two most obvious exceptions to this broad-strokes account are in the southern Black suburbs of Atlanta. Stonecrest and South Fulton. My extended assessment of the former of these two new cities—in particular its relation to the otherwise overwhelmingly white secessionary trend—has been published in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Urban Affairs* focusing on the theoretical, cultural, and political valences of the Black Mecca.

This distinction between colorblind, intent-driven understandings of racism and race-conscious, impact-driven understandings is central to my project. Specifically, I anchor my own understandings of race and racism in the work of Gilmore (2002), which is to say that I understand both as inextricable from and central to the reproduction of power and difference, and Du Bois (1935/98, 1920/2016), which is to say that I understand such difference to be dialectical and such power to be inextricable from, though not identical to, political economy.

At its most fundamental level, this critical approach to theorizing race and racism relies on the constellation of approaches in social theory that we now know collectively as Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT emerges from critical legal studies as a conceptual tool for highlighting the extent to which racial categories have been (legally, bureaucratically, socially) constructed and reproduced (Goldberg, 2001; Mills, 2017; Winant, 2002; 2004). The body of work which might be said to represent contemporary CRT is quite varied; nevertheless, we can, I think, safely say that all CRT is concerned to some degree with the production and ordering of difference through racial categories.

Omi & Winant (2015) introduce a language of racial projects into social scientific theory, signaling a critical turn in the social scientific understanding of race, and in so doing bring CRT nearer to an implicit theory of racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983/2000) than does any other approach within the broad tradition. Race, as they concede, is generally understood in most scholarly fields to be socially constructed, but acknowledging this social construction is the beginning, not the end, of a critical engagement with race. Probing the social construction of race yields limitless subsequent questions, the most important of which is, perhaps: “what role does race play within the broader social systems in which it

is embedded?" (p. 106). In order to begin to answer some of these questions, Omi & Winant introduce racialization and racial projects as two key concepts.

Racialization is concerned with how meaning is constituted around and assigned to human bodies and their particular phenotypic characteristics. This process of racialization is central to the coherence of a critical race theory. Omi & Winant (2015) reject the idea that race is either essential (i.e. biological, etc.) or illusory: "We understand race as an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. With this in mind, we advance the following definition: *Race is a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies"* (p. 110). This 'making up' of people implicates a particular nexus of "social structure and cultural representation," which are linked in racial projects (p. 124; see also West, 1987). Similarly, Fields & Fields (2012) refer to this making real of race as r*acecraft*, a question-begging exercise whereby acts of aggression against particular communities are rendered as essential characteristics of these same communities.

Whereas the concept of racialization forms the operational backbone of Omi & Winant's (2015) critical race theory, the concept of racial projects is central to its explanatory and political power, as it links racialization with social structure and everyday life. Racial projects, they argue, perform both the "ideological and practical 'work' of making [links between structure and signification] and articulating the connection between them" (p. 125). Omi & Winant elaborate further:

> *A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and redistribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines.* Racial

> projects connect what race *means* in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized* based upon that meaning. Racial projects are attempts both to shape the ways in which social structures are racially signified and the ways that racial meanings are embedded in social structures. (p. 125)

A theory of racial projects thus engages with the political, redistributive projects that occur along the lines that processes of racialization help to reify. Racial projects happen at various scales, but these are not fixed: racial projects can also jump, travel, and interact—dialectically, convergently, and hierarchically—with other projects. Omi & Winant (2015) write: "Projects framed at the local level, for example, can end up influencing national policies and initiatives" whereas larger-scale projects "can be creatively and strategically recast at regional and local levels" (pp. 125-126). "At any given historical moment," they continue, "racial projects compete and overlap, evincing varying capacity either to maintain or to challenge the prevailing racial system" (p. 126). Finally, racial projects that reproduce or institute 'structures of domination' based on racialized categories are racist projects—Omi & Winant are clear to distinguish between racial projects and racism, neither assuming nor precluding their interaction. There are also anti-racist projects that resist or else combat these same structures. In either instance, the account which critical race theorists—and particularly Omi & Winant—offer contemporary scholars of race and racism is a robust tool for thinking through the production and ordering of difference.

Indeed, the nexus of power and difference is of significant concern to many historians and theorists of race (see, e.g., Davis, 1981; Du Bois, 1998; Fields & Fields, 2012; Goldberg, 2001; Gilmore, 1999; Hall, 1980; Marable, 2015; Mills, 2017; Wilson, 2000;

Weheliye, 2014; Winant, 2002). Gilmore (2002) calls this particular coupling ‘fatal’ as it results consistently in premature Black death (McKittrick, 2013), whether violent and flashing or slow and dripping. Among a host of others, Pulido (2017; 2016), as we have briefly discussed above, links this death-dealing explicitly to racial capitalism, which we will reconsider shortly.

Necropolitics, following Mbembe’s (2019) play on *biopolitics*, is one form this power takes, the government of death. One of the starkest examples of this power comes from Rodriguez et al. (2015), who estimate 2.7 million excess deaths among Black people from 1970 to 2004, primarily due to racially uneven exposure to social determinants of health. But it is the second order power of this necropolitics that truly astounds: had these millions not been exposed to early death, the authors find, the 2004 electorate would have increased by *1 million* black votes. The differential mortality between white and Black people is shaping politics at all scales by changing the makeup of the electorate, and

> given the critical role of elected politicians in the policy-making apparatus, the available voter pool is an essential mechanism for the distribution of interests that will ultimately be represented in the policies and programs that affect us all…large and persistent black-white mortality disparities have been both a cause and a consequence of partisan US politics over the past 40 years. (p. 197)

The impact of excess Black death is staggering, and, as Rodriguez et al. (2015) show, its political implications are devastating to the possibility of ever arresting this necropolitical feedback loop. The work of Clyde Woods (2010) demonstrates a more precise functioning of this sort of necropolitical abandonment under racial capitalism, drawing attention to both the production of racialized exposure in pre-Katrina New Orleans and the purposeful

refusal of the state and other empowered actors to provide aid and support to (largely Black) citizens of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Necropolitical abandonment is, of course, not the only mechanism by which market power is exercised over and by differently racialized communities. McKittrick & Woods (2007), for instance, demonstrate the space-ordering power of a racialized politics of place, which produces both differential exposure and contextual resistance to racial capitalist uneven development. Similarly, Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor (2019) offers an account of the impossibility of homeownership to provide for social reproduction of Black communities. She aims her critique not only at those policies which have induced clear abandonment of Black people in the real estate market (e.g. redlining, restrictive covenants, gentrification) but also of what she terms 'predatory inclusion' (e.g. sub-prime mortgages) into the same markets. In both modes, the central mechanism by which those of the recognized *bios* (Agamben, 1998) are made free, are able to socially reproduce (i.e. wealth accumulation through homeownership) and politically participate (as propertied citizens) in society is denied to Black people.

Here, having named it repeatedly, we should at last linger briefly with racial capitalism. Robison (1983/2000) demonstrates convincingly that capitalism was always-already racial capitalism, that racecraft (Fields & Fields, 2012)—that is, the making real of race—has always inhered in, always structured capitalist extraction and exchange, that such capitalist activity has produced and structured racial difference. Robinson is directly preceded in such claims, *i.e.*, in linking the depredations of capital to the necessary reproduction of race (and *vice versa*), by such thinkers as Oliver Cox (1959a, 1959b), while scholars such as

Manning Marable (2015) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1935/1998) have offered complementary historical accounts outside of this narrower genealogy.

Crucially, as Táíwò & Bright (2020, para. 10) argue, racial capitalism resists idealist interpretations of capitalism (channeling, in a very useful way, Geoff Mann's insistence that we reckon with actually-existing capitalism rather than some abstract or ideal form) in favor of grounded, historical-geographical approaches, *viz.*: "theorists of racial capitalism are not interested in the characteristics capitalism *could have* had in some conceivable world…[t]hey describe it based on the features it does, in fact, have." In this sense, Robinson and those who have followed in his wake realize the charge that Cornel West (1987, para. 26) offers to bourgeois and Marxist theorists of race to "become more radically historical than is envisioned by the Marxist tradition…confronting more candidly the myriad of effects and consequences (intended and unintended, conscious and unconscious) of power-laden and conflict-ridden social practices."

What racial capitalism offers, in my view, as a theoretical approach is the ability to effectively, historically, and systematically "think about the relationship between capitalism and racial oppression that departs from the view that they are distinct and successive historical phenomena" (Makalani, 2021, para. 8). It is also an approach which centers the materiality of race, not in the sense that Omi & Winant suggest, which is to say as a problem of ocularity, but in a Marxist sense, by emphasizing the social and economic relations that link production and exchange, that assign value, that mediate social reproduction.

Yet, as Olson (2004) reminds us, the genesis of such inequalities lies most fundamentally in the [re]production—and elevation—of whiteness *vis-à-vis* Blackness in

the ordering of the American demos, in the production and government of its proper citizen, who is always-already racialized (see also Fields & fields, 2012). Indeed, as du Bois (1935/98, 1920/2016) insists, we cannot understand abandonment, violence, or extraction—nor the political and territorial abstractions that govern and reproduce them—without a thoroughgoing dissection of whiteness *per se*, for, as Fields and Fields (2012) remind us, it was only by Black enslavement that whiteness was made free. Whiteness, in my understanding, is thus simultaneously a social relation of power, an embodied marker onto which social values such as citizenship are projected, and a normative invisible around which society is structured (Housel, 2009; Staiger, 2004; Vanderbeck, 2008, Baldwin, 2012; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). Whiteness is also a deeply spatial phenomenon (Housel, 2009; Inwood, 2019; Inwood & Bonds, 2017; Purifoy & Seamster, 2020; Schuermans et al., 2015), that both produces and is inflected by processes of racialization.

Of particular relevance for the work at hand is Vanderbeck's (2008) investigation into urban and suburban geographies of whiteness through a case study of the Fresh Air Fund in New York City, whereby children of color are whisked out of the crowded, poor inner city to spend summer weeks in the suburban and rural homes of white volunteer hosts. Taken together with other investigations (e.g. Staiger, 2004), this work hits upon a fundamental contradiction of whiteness as a social and political construction, namely that that which is held up as panacea (i.e. whiteness) is at least partially culpable in the very problems it seeks to solve through the lending of itself. That is, whiteness is implicated in the inequities for which whiteness (or its normative abstractions) is the cure. We will see this logic mirrored explicitly across multiple elements of the Buckhead movement in the pages that follow, as white secession is positioned as a broader panacea to what are, when

not wholly fabricated or grossly misinterpreted, direct symptoms of uneven development under racial capitalism. Nevertheless, as Shaw (2006) reminds us, it is precisely these contradictions that render whiteness as a contingent, and, ultimately, contestable phenomenon.

I speak to themes of race—especially those which touch both racial capitalism and whiteness— throughout the coming pages. In Chapter 3, I focus particularly on the Du Boisian dialectic of race as instrumental to the production of racial capitalist value and the reproduction and bounding of possessive geographies (Bonds, 2020) of whiteness, offering a particularly geographic invigoration of CRT approaches. Chapter 4 speaks less immediately to the theorization of race, to direct questions of power and difference as above; nevertheless, it does lay bare certain crucial foundations that license racially-uneven political and material outcomes. Chapter 5, on the other hand, engages quite explicitly with whiteness, thinking particularly about the mechanisms by which white possessive power is effectively exercised across neoliberal and authoritarian modes, how whiteness is itself a product of racecraft (Fields & Fields, 2012), how white freedom is predicated on the impediment and subversion of universal freedom.

Democracy

The second problematic that has animated my work around secession is democracy. A tricky thing, democracy; what do we intend by its invocation? It is an ideal horizon, to be sure of self-government (Taylor, 2019), but also an imperfect set of historically contingent institutions and logics that seek, however imperfectly, to realize and maintain (certain images of) this ideal across geographic and cultural contexts. It is a precisely demarcated identity of ruler and ruled and at the same time an empty, impenetrable shibboleth of

vacuous contemporary politicking, "full," as Shakespeare (1623, Act V Scene V) might put it, "of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." Perhaps, then, it is easier to begin with a contradiction than a definition. Cityhood has, from its earliest instantiation in 2005, covered itself in the mantle of democracy, asserting the legitimacy of its intentions by reference to a participatory politics, an ideal denied, ostensibly, by imbrication with external communities, co-location within larger county or city configurations. Yet the process of secession itself, not to mention the many externalities that follow on from it, is deeply inconsistent with the democratic ideals espoused by secessionists. Indeed, secession *actively* disenfranchises those not granted the consideration of municipal citizenship in a given referendum and reshapes the internal electorate of the new city.

At the risk of putting too fine a point on this issue, there is a misapprehension, a fetishization of scale at play here: the more localized a constituency, the more democratic by default. This assumption is, of course and of necessity, false; gated communities, for instance, tend to be quite small in a relative sense, but one would be hard pressed to defend their democratic *bona fides* as part of the urban patchwork.[3] Moreover, any increase in *democracy*—as if such a thing could be isolated out as simply one variable among many, assessed in linear units, measured and known—within the bounds of new cities comes at the expense of democratic participation without, as only those residents who happen to fall within the proposed bounds of new cities are enfranchised *vis-à-vis* the question of incorporation. Again, the issue here is not so much that insufficient explanations or excuses of this fact aafavare offered, but rather that nobody at all seem particularly interested in the *prima facie* contradiction at the heart of this ostensible democratization of local

[3] Of course, the converse is equally untrue as an axiom; indeed, scale alone strikes one as a poor proxy for relative democracy.

government. We find ourselves, again, constrained by the semiotic and ideological valences of democracy.

Yet even if we cannot easily specify what democracy is, perhaps we can nevertheless develop some sense for what democracy does. Astra Taylor's recent book, *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone*, makes a useful argument along such a line. Taylor (2019, p. 2) writes:

> Democracy is the promise of the people ruling, but a promise that can never be wholly fulfilled because its implications and scope keep changing. Over centuries our conceptions of democracy have expanded and evolved, with democracy becoming more inclusive and robust in many ways, yet who counts as the people, how they rule, and where they do so remain eternally up for debate. Democracy destabilizes its own legitimacy and purpose by design, subjecting its core components to continual examination and scrutiny.

Taylor concurs with Cornel West—whom she cites repeatedly, and whom I engage repeatedly throughout this dissertation—that democracy, though always a partial and impossible-to-pin-down expression of self-rule, is nevertheless worthy of a 'leap of faith':

> I don't believe democracy exists (indeed it never has). Instead, the ideal of self-rule is exactly that, a principle that always occupies a distant and retreating horizon, something we must continue to reach toward yet fail to grasp. (p. 13)

What Taylor offers us is a way to mourn, an image of democracy lost. In so doing, she delineates an outside to democracy that is helpful for the project at hand—she seeks not to specify what democracy is; rather, she forces the reader to reckon with the end of the struggle for democracy. While we cannot know the truly democratic due to its always

partial nature, we can, she insists, know the undemocratic by its unwillingness to reach for the ideal horizon of self-rule. Indeed, it is this contradiction, this self-negation which itself drives the designed destabilization and reinvigoration of democracy *per se*.

Despite the utility of this approach for understanding the ideal of self-governance as a necessarily unreachable horizon, I must disagree with Taylor that democracy doesn't exist or hasn't existed. Indeed, there is a significant literature on the surficial contradiction between the United States' ostensible commitment to democratic republicanism and its legacy of slaveholding, disenfranchisement, extrajudicial murder, and other infringements on liberty and justice for all. For instance, though neither uses Robinson's term explicitly, both Olson (2004, 2001) and Allen (2012) read democracy as converging with racial capitalism through the racialized granting and withholding of political economic power: as we've seen in the prior subsection, economic freedom, accumulation, and equality for some are conditioned on the marginalization of a racialized (and in this instance, specifically, Black) other. Rather than disavow conjunctural enactments of democracy as failing to achieve the ideal, it is perhaps productive to allow for such incomplete realizations of the horizon of self-rule to instruct us as to the limits of liberal democracy as an actually existing phenomenon at urban and national scales.

The literature on the Right to the City offers one way of thinking through a more explicitly liberatory urban democracy (e.g. Barnett, 2014; Harvey, 2008; Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2008), one which casts the actually existing democracy above into sharp relief. These interventions have largely been "framed by a contrast between the consensual orientations of deliberative democrats on the one hand, and the worldlier perspectives provided by post-structuralist theories of radical democracy and agonistic pluralism on the

other" (Barnett, 2014, p. 1626). More specifically, though, the Right to the City is a specific way of reckoning with the reality that the particular

> kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. (Harvey, 2008, p. 23)

This notion of collective power to 'change ourselves by changing the city' is central to the question of urban democracy; theorists of the Right to the City are clear about the relation of the exercise of this sort of power and the production of space broadly. For Mitchell (2003), collective, democratic power is co-produced with public space as a means of rupturing hegemonic consensus on the production and governing of urban space—crucially, secessionist projects represent a *redoubling* of this consensus, a localized reinvigoration of the racial capitalist status quo *against* anticipated or emergent rupture. Most critically, though, the Right to the City literature emphasizes the extent to which the constant pursuit of a more perfect democracy is inhibited by precisely those urban relations, technologies, and aesthetics (Summers, 2019) which are reified "by expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline" (Harris, 1993, p. 1715)—and that those who wish to assert a more democratic right to the city must work to change these. Yet, as I suggest briefly in the prior subsection, such rights and capacities are, under white

democracy, mediated by a practice and understanding of racial citizenship that privileges and reproduces whiteness (Lopez, 1997; Olson, 2008, 2004, 2001).

Olson (2004) suggests that a final, overarching problem with white democracy is that it results in very little politics at all. Here, Olson channels the distinction, articulated by Rancière (1999) and others (Davidson & Iveson, 2015; Purcell, 2014), between the political and police power. The former, for Rancière, is eruptive activity of the people against the ruling order, whereas the latter is precisely that hegemonic order whose internal negotiations we conventionally understand as politics *per se*. In precisely such a vein, Purcell (2014) contends that the goal of political activity must be "something other than the democracy of the liberal-democratic state, with its elections, parties, and oligarchic institutions," that it must seek "real democracy, democracy conceived of as a perpetual collective struggle by people to take up the project of managing the conditions of their own existence," that in the an urban context, this 'real' democracy "struggles against the neoliberal city, a commodified and privatised city in which property rights and economic growth are the main logic of the urban spatial order…seeks instead to democratise the city such that the needs, perspectives, and values of urban inhabitants become primary." It is precisely this sort of broader reorganization, this challenge to the prevailing police order that secession seeks to head off.

As the selection from Purcell above suggests, a parallel disjunction lies at the heart of [neo]liberal urban governance, which is to say that the supposed politics of (and under) neoliberal hegemony are no real politics at all. Indeed, neoliberalism functions as a post-political (MacLeod, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2011) project, which actively suppresses the Rancièrian notion of politics in favor of a depoliticized administrative state, approaching

what Graeber (2015) evocatively calls a "utopia of rules." In broad strokes, such a claim is not particularly original: Purcell (2008), for instance, advances a convergent line of argument, as does Wendy Brown (2019; 2015). Even in accounts of neoliberal urban governance where democracy itself is not at the explicit center of analysis (as, e.g. in Blomley, 2004; Hackworth, 2007), one can sense a normative democratic ideal lurking just off-stage. So it is here as well—at the heart of the work to follow is a constant [re]negotiation between the unrealizable, desired horizon of democracy and the persistent, [neo]liberal forms of actually existing democracy that cannot reach beyond themselves, that keep us ever on the shore.

Within this dissertation, my work in the broader problematic of democracy is perhaps most explicit in Chapter 4, where I offer a critical reading of the actually-existing democratic procedures of the new secession, arguing that such technocratic objects and processes work *against* a broader concept of the public all while offering a false image of self-determination, which is only ever a freedom for some predicated on the disenfranchisement of the rest. In Chapter 3, the concept of boundary work is similarly elucidated as a mechanism for excising certain (particularly certain racialized) elements of the broader *demos* from the political governance of certain places. Indeed the actual *work* of boundary work is precisely to limit the fullest expression of democratic control over space by reconfiguring constituencies, dispersing communities, and building walls. And, as I demonstrate in Chapter 5, the undoing of the *demos* (Brown, 2015) by neoliberalism paves the way for white authoritarian attempts at both controlling and destroying the public *per se.*

(Urban) Political Economy

The final problematic which has occupied me these years is that of political economy and, most particularly, the territoriality of private property which animates no small fraction of urban politics writ large, but which plays a particularly significant role in debates around secession. Such concern is manifest, as the reader will come to see, in the fixation within the secession movement on such things as taxation, code enforcement, and economic development. But this problem has deeper roots. That urban (and other) governance should have as its central aim the edification of individual property, that homeowners and businessmen are the natural and correct constituency of the urban political, that efficiency and control, more so than sufficiency or public will, is the necessary horizon of local self-rule—these all are unquestioned among secessionists. The error, of course, is that such assumptions have never been given, have never preceded politics as ontological *a priori*; rather, they are themselves the objects of the political *per se*, the foundational, but contingent, discourses which license a multi-scalar, second-order politics estranged from its own conditions of existence.

Chief, perhaps, among such foundations is private property (Dorries, 2022; see also Kelly, 2022). Indeed, as Sundell (2021, p.12) argues, we must understand "economism and property rights as part of capitalist common sense, functioning to block the extension of democracy to the sphere of economic production." Sundell builds on Laclau & Mouffe (2014; Laclau, 1977/2011) to suggest that the sort of 'real' democracy that Purcell (2014) advances in the prior subsection requires a full extension of democratic ideals into the economic sphere, indeed that a flattening of this distinction between politics and economy,

so thoroughly critiqued by Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981), is a necessary precondition of a true democratic formation.

More broadly, as Highsmith (2020, para. 5) argues, the political economy of urban space in the US context is marked by the "structural violence of municipal hoarding," whereby white wealth is "passed down across generations—over decades in which families of color were systematically excluded from economic opportunity—is thus shielded from the needs of neighboring families of color." This exclusion largely takes the form of property in real estate. Walsh (2018, 2017) identifies a parallel, though narrower, tendency in urban political economy, whereby a form of municipal hoarding that she calls 'taxpayer citizenship' gives white property owners—–through the paying of taxes—a sort of heckler's veto over broader public policy and redistribution (Bouie, 2023). She demonstrates how taxpayer identity and tax policy itself are co-produced with this form of municipal hoarding and, further, links 'taxpayer citizenship' to broader, contemporary crises in education and social inequality. Thus, rather than simply capitalist and laborer, perhaps the other relevant distinction and antagonism within urban political economy is between the white propertied class and all other claimants on urban space and social wealth.

Within urban geography, private property's most energetic critics have frequently positioned their analyses within the broader literature on neoliberal urbanism. Urban geography's engagement with neoliberalism represents a now decades-long attempt to theorize and struggle against the imperatives and forms of private power in contemporary, fragmented urbanization. Yet, despite its central conceptual place in recent urban theory, *neoliberalism*—as virtually any recent study which even remotely approaches the topic will aver—remains a highly-contested, multifaceted term. Nevertheless, there is an

identifiable core that a preponderance of urban geographers seem to agree upon: neoliberalism involves state action to some degree, favors market-driven reforms and policy, is a spatial and political process, works against democratic urban life, and is context- and place- specific in its particular forms (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; 2002; Springer, 2010).

Purcell (2008) offers us one useful and reasonably complete understanding of urban neoliberalism in the last several decades:

> …social life has become increasingly subjected to the logic of neoliberalism: free markets, competitive relations, and minimal state regulation of capital. The result for cities has been an intensification of the competition among urban areas for capital investment. Economic growth has become the dominant imperative for urban policy and planning. As a result, urban land is seen primarily as property, and maximizing its exchange value is the dominant concern. The property rights of owners greatly outweigh and other claims by subordinate groups. Governments expand the assistance they provide to capital interests, even as they back away from social commitments to their citizens. In that context, democratic decision-making is often seen as messy, slow, and inefficient; it is a luxury cities competing desperately for investment cannot afford. The result of neoliberalization, many argue, is that cities are becoming ever more unequal, segregated, unhealthy, and oppressive… (p. 2)

Key to Purcell's analysis is the extension of market logics and materialities into all forms of social relation alongside the transformation of city governance into a mechanism for attracting capital and generating profits. Implicit in this argument is the role of

government at multiple scales in producing the conditions for ostensibly spontaneous free markets and competition (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009; Massey, 2007). More broadly, as a modality of urban governance, neoliberalism

> powerfully structures the parameters for the governance of contemporary urban development—for instance, by defining the character of "appropriate" policy choices, by constraining democratic participation in political life, by diffusing dissent and oppositional mobilization, and/ or by disseminating new ideological visions of social and moral order in the city. (Brenner & Theodore, 2005, p. 103)

There is, then, an element of problem-closure (Guthman, 2011) and path dependency which both prefigures and accompanies the neoliberalizing drive in cities (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009).

One area of urban governance where urban neoliberalization has had quite an extreme and well-publicized effect is housing (Jones & Popke, 2013; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009; Purcell, 2008; Rolnik, 2013). In the neoliberalization of housing, one can see quite clearly the central dynamics of market-driven reform as well as several other features that comprise the neoliberal approach to policy. In addition to the intentional neglect and gleeful razing of public housing stock, the exposure of remaining public housing initiatives to the violences of the market (and its various demons: 'cost-efficiency', 'public-private partnerships', etc.) marks this transformation. We have, too, seen the financialization of private housing, as land commodities are securitized and traded (Christophers, 2015). The use-value which once ostensibly inhered in the possessing of property has been all but subsumed under the (now highly abstracted) accumulative exchange value of speculative real estate.

Peck (2011) takes this relatively coherent urban geographical analysis of neoliberalism and (re)places it in the suburbs. He argues that suburban neoliberal

> orientations find a concrete expression in the gated community, a quintessentially "suburban solution" …and today one of the preeminent sites for the reproduction of American whiteness, cultural conformity, and class privilege. According to political commentator, Dan Walters, suburbanization reflects an escalating logic of property-rights activism, privatism, and (de)regulatory separatism, based on the homeowning ethos… (p. 904)

And yet, as in all places, neoliberalism in the suburbs is uneven and contested; Peck in particular points to contradictions between growth machine-style (Logan & Molotch, 2007; MacLeod, 2011) and low-density, low-growth constituencies in what he, borrowing from Jackson (1987), names the crabgrass frontier. In the suburbs, "[n]eoliberalization thus reconstitutes the terrain of political-economic governance—and social struggle" (Brenner & Theodore, 2005, p.104).

While it is imperative to understand what it is that neoliberalization seeks to accomplish with respect to policy and governance, we must also be clear that neoliberalism is not simply a set of political economic policies, nor is it merely one approach to urban governance out of many. Rather, as Purcell (2008), Brenner & Theodore (2005; 2002), Springer (2010), Harvey (2005), and other geographers contend, neoliberalism constitutes an *ideological* project, a policy hegemony, a governmentality. In its most basic form, this neoliberal hegemony insists that society functions better under a market logic than any other logic, "[t]hus market logics and competitive discipline should be fostered in the economy and should even be extended beyond the economy, to

institutions like the state, universities, hospitals, schools, and so on" (Purcell, 2008, p. 13). While its hegemony will always be contested and incomplete (Enright, 2017), the ideology of neoliberalism has largely succeeded in centering within urban debates a narrow, fetishistic concern for private property, its territory, and its government, both individual and corporate.

This market logic, this political rationale comprises no small part of the core of the discourse of secession, which Chapter 4 is committed to [un]grounding. It is in this chapter that such fundamental political economic processes as taxation and privatization come under close scrutiny as both undergirding and obscuring racial capitalist social relations, with hegemonic attitudes around each serving as the unquestionable grounds from which secessionist politics are licensed. This argument is reprised and elaborated in Chapter 5, with a particular focus on the role of urban authoritarianism in ensuring the stability of these foundational, political economic elements of racial capitalism through police power. Chapter 3 offers a slightly different—though complementary—approach, considering how expectations of economic value (particularly racialized appreciation [see Markley et al., 2020])—and concomitant desires by the white bourgeoisie to maintain the hermetic segregation of democracy and economy—drive the production and revision of boundaries.

Conceptual Throughlines

Throughout this dissertation I attempt to capture and work with and in the problematics above—those thorny imbrications, in short, of race, political economy, and democracy—through three, linked concepts. *Concept* is always a contingent, an incomplete designation, necessary but insufficient to the project of representation in social inquiry. Federic Jameson

(2014) perfectly captures the challenges—indeed the dangers—of precise delineation, taking social class as his illustrative object: it is, he argues, "at one and the same time a sociological idea, a political concept, a historical conjuncture, an activist slogan, yet a definition in terms of any one of these perspectives alone is bound to be unsatisfactory" (p.7). Thus, when I name my concepts as such, it must be understood that they are also always sites of inquiry, spaces of contestation, political rationales.

Finally, just as the problematics above inform and bleed into one another through the relations and contradictions of racial capitalism, these concepts articulate to one another and to each of the problematics in overlapping, nonlinear, and emergent ways. For instance, secession democracy as a concept might speak most directly to the democracy problematic, but it never does so without some shading from boundary work; it also speaks to the race problematic, but not in a purely additive sense, whereby its position *vis-à-vis* democracy can be isolated from its imbrication with race. The concepts [cor]respond to the problematics, but not exclusively, necessarily, or directly to any given one.

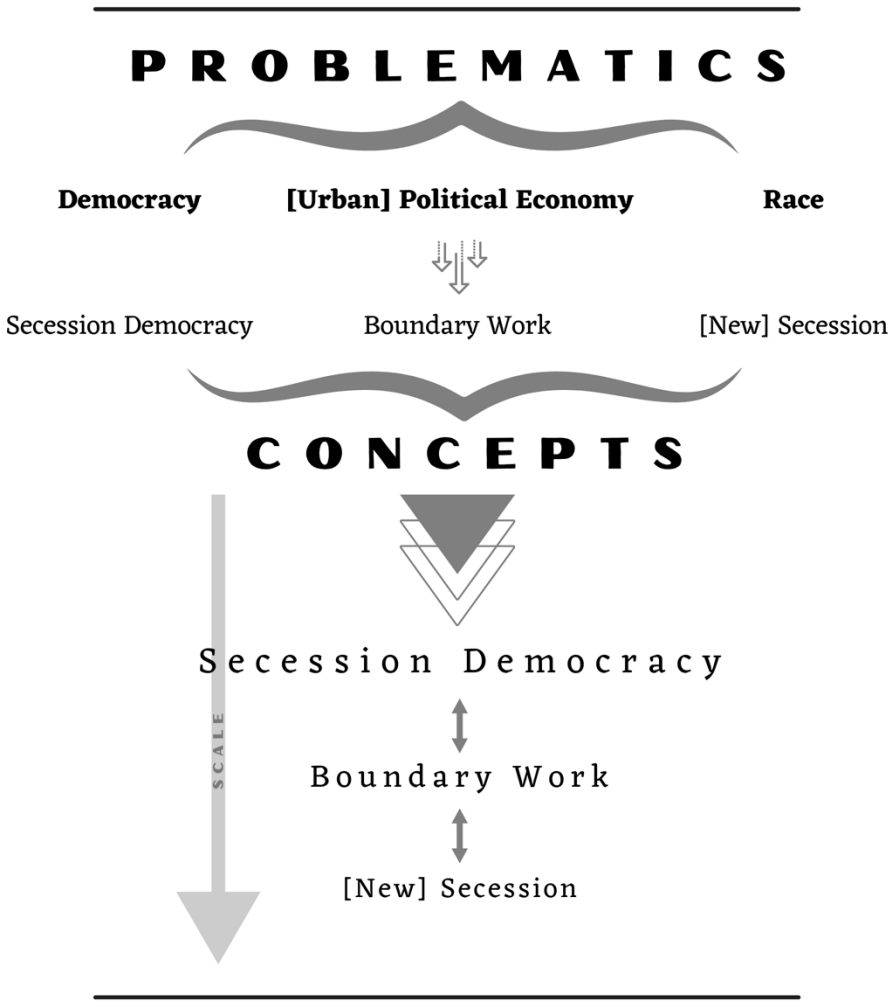

Figure 1.3 Conceptual map, linking broader problematics with concepts and demonstrating scalar relationship of concepts

The first concept is *secession*, particularly the *new secession,* both of which we have already encountered in this introduction. By this latter term, I mean the collection of linked movements by which affluent, white communities in Atlanta have produced new cities over the past two decades, as well as the discourses that have licensed and reflected these movements. While the literature on such efforts remains quite slim, scholars across disciplines have nevertheless developed and used multiple terminologies. Descriptive work, for instance, has generally referred to such projects as simply 'cityhood' or

'incorporation' movements under a larger banner of 'local municipal boundary change' (see Smith, 2011; Smith & Debbage, 2011; 2006).

More critical accounts have largely landed upon some variety of 'secession'; indeed, following Michan Connor, Roger Keil, and others, I myself have characterized certain individual movements as 'urban secession' or 'suburban secession' in prior writings. The reasons that I have settled, for this dissertation, upon the conceptual language of the new secession are multiple. First—as will be thoroughly addressed in a later chapter—such technical characterizations as boundary change, cityhood, or incorporation reproduce the conventional idea that secession movements are only banal exercises in local government, stifling the sort of politicization that this work seeks to effect. I have foregone the 'urban' and 'suburban' modifiers, as they are simultaneously less precise and less universal than I would prefer; further, they emphasize a sort of geographic fixity—a static geography of location—rather than the sociospatial relationality I emphasize throughout this work. Finally, the 'new' component of the concept works doubly. First, it temporally circumscribes a discrete set of movements beginning with the City of Sandy Springs in 2005. Second, it gestures to the broader genealogy of secession which will play no small role in the following chapters.

More broadly, however, a central, animating commitment of this work is that the complex, dynamic, and, at times, contradictory phenomenon of secession *per se* deserves meaningful engagement from geographers. Major developments on the global stage—Brexit, for example, which is perhaps the largest and the loudest of these in recent memory—affirm the increasing importance of understanding the use of territories and boundaries in such a manner. While not generally characterized as such, neither in

scholarship nor in media, the British campaign to leave the European Union was a secessionary one, a movement predicated on condensing returns to British capital, reasserting cultural and territorial hegemony in an increasingly networked and diversifying Europe (see Bauböck [2019] on European secession more broadly). Closer to home, the Texas GOP (TX GOP Platform & Resolutions Committee, 2022, p. 6) recently released a deeply reactionary party platform, undergirded in the last instance by a commitment to secession:

> Pursuant to Article 1, Section 1, of the Texas Constitution, the federal government has impaired our right of local self-government. Therefore, federally mandated legislation that infringes upon the 10th Amendment rights of Texas should be ignored, opposed, refused, and nullified. Texas retains the right to secede from the United States, and the Texas Legislature should be called upon to pass a referendum consistent thereto.

In this interpretation, the US federal system is always-already a perversion of correct (i.e., local) government; this is fairly standard fare for libertarians and states-rights partisans in the United States and thus unsurprising in this context. What is less common—and more concerning—is the idea that the appropriate response to existing national policies not in line with the party imaginary is not democratic deliberation, nor even grudging compliance, but an imminent authoritarian bid for territorial sovereignty and political univocality which would disenfranchise and further marginalize millions of Texans. Such an attempt is, of course, not out of character for the state, as its originally seceded from Mexico in 1836 in order to maintain slavery within its borders. The US annexation of Texas a decade later was also intended to strengthen pro-slavery causes on the continent.

Other, less directly obvious examples of secession motivate me here. Private school vouchers, for instance, offer subsidized secession from a public education. Offshoring and other tax evasion mechanisms allow the wealthiest Americans to secede from public responsibility and oversight. The Greater Idaho Movement, which seeks to relocate the Idaho/Oregon border by providing for the secession of multiple white, rural counties within Oregon, allowing these to join the Republican-dominated state of Idaho as a means of pre-empting democratic governance in Oregon (see Lozano, 2023). Koppelman (2022) perhaps best synthesizes the secessionary mindset, demonstrates its pervasiveness across American politics. He quotes Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito as inquiring from the bench—in a case on the ACA's individual mandate—as to whether it is indeed the case that "what this mandate is really doing is not requiring the people who are subject to it to pay for the services they are going to consume? It is requiring them to subsidize services that will be received by someone else." Writing in the New Yorker, Benjamin Wallace-Wells (2023) argues that such logic presupposes the right of the taxpayer "not to be compelled to pay for a service he does not want," positioning Alito's argument as evidence of resurgent libertarianism within American democracy.

As I hope to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, I read such arguments, instead, as secessionist. These movements and their authorizing discourses do not seek total freedom from the compulsion of the state, not individual liberty for its own sake, but rather the right of the citizen (who, as Olson [2008; 2004; 2001] demonstrates, is always already racialized, classed) to unilaterally preempt the state's capacity to deploy and redistribute public funds, to move, against a broader public will. Secession democracy, which I will elaborate in multiple later moments, is the system that sanctions such actions, legitimizes

them, holds them in trust for the correct (read: white) citizen to be deployed when threats to capital and political hegemony raise their heads.

Despite such compelling and concerning examples, secession, even in this broadest definition, remains severely understudied, especially—and curiously—within geography. This absence endures even in the face of robust geographic literatures on political economy, uneven development, social justice, geopolitics, global suburbanisms, race, and urban governance more generally. What's more—as regards the more circumscribed definition of secession employed throughout this work, i.e., the new secession—existing urban and geographic scholarship on local municipal boundary change simply falls short in accounting for the territorial and political economy of racial difference in urban space, an absence which becomes increasingly stark as the reinvigoration of theories of racial capitalism continues to captivate the social sciences and humanities (see, e.g., Bright et. al, 2022; Inwood, 2018; Purifoy & Seamster, 2020).

The second concept is *boundary work.* By this, I intend something significantly broader than—but nevertheless intimately related to—the new secession. Boundary work directly challenges the passivity of 'local municipal boundary change' 'newly-inorporated municipalities' and other banal characterizations of secession by centering active, deliberate work—this is quite transparent. But the concept goes beyond and behind the new secession, seeking to characterize an entire mode of racialized political action, one which has both a deep history and a complex spatial diffusion in the United States. Put simply, boundary work is the constant production or renegotiation of borders and territories—the hardening or abandonment of the same—towards the maintenance of white hegemony. The coherence of boundary work is not in some constant technique of reterritorialization; rather

it is in the use of diverse boundary mechanisms to reproduce racial capitalist relations of power and difference. Thus, we can understand the earlier annexation of Buckhead as continuous with the current movement for Buckhead City. While secessionists have attempted, at times, to cast Buckhead City as somehow undoing the more self-evident racial chicanery of the Buckhead annexation, thinking through boundary work collapses this false inversion.

To that end, I develop a framework for thinking together such seemingly disparate activities—e.g., incorporation, annexation, segregation, white flight—as instantiations of a practice of boundary work. Boundary work is the purposeful creation, manipulation, or reconfiguration of boundaries towards the production or stabilization of white capitalist hegemony. The mid-century use of restrictive racial covenants (Kelly, 2022), for instance, can be read as a practice of boundary work because it attempted to solidify possessive (real estate) investments in whiteness (Lipsitz, 2006) by precluding Black buyers from integrating neighborhoods. Contemporary secession, while vastly different in scale and scope, nevertheless seeks to similarly stabilize the conditions of white accumulation by asserting an additional layer of political control over valuable territories and undesirable populations, while simultaneously shrinking financial obligations to broader civic configurations.

In both cases, the production of new boundaries, new spatial taxonomies, is central to the realization of maximal return on investments in whiteness (Lipsitz, 2006). In both instances, too, legal (at the time, in the case of racial covenants) techniques of local governance are deployed by white communities at the expense of Black ones. Yet in historical instances when Black communities have attempted to secure their own

flourishing—one imagines Tulsa, Wilmington—violent retribution follows. Non-white communities are precluded from full participation in white institutions (Lewis, 2022; Markley, et al., 2021; Taylor, 2019); at the same time, they are punished for more insular attempts at community-building and place-making (see Appendix A in this document). In neither case can threats to the possessive geographies of whiteness be allowed to take root.

The third, and final, element of my conceptual triad is democracy itself, through the figure of *actually existing democracy.* It is simultaneously the least concrete of the three concepts and the most fundamental to the logic of the argument unfolding herein. I shall attempt briefly to make this more tangible: rather than consider such phenomena as gerrymandering, voter purges, and boundary work to be *anti*democratic, I argue, that we should understand them as instead necessary to the production of a certain type of liberal democracy, the type within which we in the United States always-already exist and operate. The problem, then—contra so many popular accounts and political slogans—is not that such activities in some way fall short of or move against the promise of democracy. Rather, it is that democracy itself does not guarantee the sorts of freedoms and recourses we imagine—and never has.

Thus, instead of arbitrating claims over what sorts of political projects do or do not conform to the ahistorical ideal of democracy, we can instead assess the historically situated institution of democracy which has licensed political activity in the US since its inception. This institutional form we might call—borrowing from Geoff Mann's (2013) study of the contradictory, real-world negotiation of capitalism against its own contradictions—actually existing democracy.

In the US context, actually existing democracy might be more particularly understood, as Olson (2004) suggests, to be white democracy, which is to say that we might emphasize whiteness as predominantly mediating the processes by which democracy *per se* is made to actually exist in the space-times of the United States. My aim throughout this work is to further emphasize the importance of the possessive geographies of whiteness to actually existing democracy in the US; to that end, I suggest *secession democracy* as a useful term for this project and beyond. Conceptually, secession democracy not only spatializes the sorts of arguments that Olson advances, but also emphasizes the extent to which whiteness is always-already granted the freedom to exceed the rules and spaces of democracy which ostensibly govern all equally, granting it an effective state of exception from the police order which it already directs. This construction understands secession as pertaining not only to the literal separation of territory from the broader whole (as in the Confederate secession), but also to the ability of whiteness always and everywhere to transcend the rules (e.g. in gerrymandering) that limit others, to escape limitations on its own reproduction.

To that end, it is crucial to understand that democracy itself, as a form of governance predicated on a particular vision of (a certain) public will, is not inconsistent with either broadly participatory or authoritarian modes of actualization, that there is space for both conventionally liberal and reactionary modes within democracy, that neither is essentially more consistent with the democratic or parliamentary form. Marcuse (2009) makes a similar argument when he asserts that authoritarianism and liberalism are but countervailing modes of capitalist governance. The implicit contention, then, is that we should read eruptive moments of territorialized white reaction within secession

democracy—e.g. January 6th, Charlottesville—not as aberrative (see Luger, 2020) but as continuous with the more respectable, structural violences which besiege us daily in such forms as privatization, austerity, policing, and, of course, boundary work. In this sense, the possibility of self-determination, of abolition, of freedom—of all those wonders that democracy has promised—remains haunted.

The three concepts elaborated above are meant to be read in a sort of loose scalar relationship to one another, though this is by no means to set up a hierarchy of separable parts. Thus, the new secession is a conjunctural instantiation of boundary work, one by which we can elaborate and effectively parse the more thoroughgoing problem of actually-existing, secession democracy—a formation which itself structures and licenses the particulars of secession *per se*. Taken together, these concepts precipitate the contours of the work to come, suggesting its rough course across the following pages.

An Essay on Earlier Efforts

Before proceeding, I wish to address and position my existing work on the topic of secession in Atlanta. There are three reasons for this. The first is that my existing work is present in this dissertation in unavoidable ways. Rather than letting it haunt the reader unacknowledged, I prefer to pull it directly onstage, opening up meaningful theoretical and empirical connections instead of arbitrarily sealing off moments of my own thinking in the interests of producing a more hermetic document. The second reason is that these various writings represent prior attempts at articulating and responding to many of the questions we will continue to probe herein; they also contain many incompletions and theoretical openings into which my work at present seeks to step. Finally, while this dissertation

represents my most extensive attempt at reckoning with secession to date, it must itself, in the interests of coherence, leave certain questions to the side, questions which I have addressed, however partially, in other works. I think it useful to at least gesture towards these questions at the outset.

We will proceed chronologically, if for no other reason than that such an order reproduces, in fits and starts, one genealogy of my thinking on secession. Thus, the first writing to be addressed is an early essay in *Atlanta Studies* (Allums, 2017), which positions the new secession in a theoretical milieu with colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), neoliberalism, and the anti-politics of Atlanta's imagineering machine (Rutheiser, 1996). In the preceding year, a glut of new secession movements had been approved by the state legislature; there was a genuine concern that a tipping point had been reached in the previously patchy history of the new secession, that white secessionism was going to be fully and irrevocably unleashed on the already-fragmented Atlanta metro to the detriment of the region and the state as a whole.

Given such fears, the precipitating problem that gave rise to this particular piece was, quite simply, that secession (or the cityhood movement, as it named itself) pretended an apolitical stance all the while disenfranchising already marginalized communities (Connor, 2015), ignoring history (Allums, Markley & Hafley, 2021), and reproducing race and class inequality (Mock, 2018). In other words, cityhood activists denied at every turn the salience of race, the potential for harm, the perversion of democracy, and the legacies of inequality that I saw as (quite transparently) fundamental to the whole exercise. Wading into the debate at its (at that point) peak, I sought at least to provide an historically- and theoretically-grounded perspective outside of the common-sense politics of problem

closure (Guthman, 2011), which continuously and effectively reenforced the discursive bounds of the secession debate. Within such genteel bounds, a reckoning with race, inequality, and democracy was rendered impossible. All secessionists cared to discuss was government efficiency; any other potential problem was prostrated before the god of the dollar. While I did not at that time possess the language to name it as such, this effort was my first attempt at [un]grounding (Landau et. al, 2011) the racial capitalist foundations of what Goldberg (2009; see also Roberts & Mahtani, 2010) names *racial neoliberalism* within the new secession.

Next is a pair of writings from 2020, which begin to reckon with the emergent formation—concurrent with and constitutive of a distinctly Trumpian political vernacular and policy regime at multiple scales—of a more reactionary urban spatial politics in Atlanta during the latter third of the 2010s. The first of these (Allums & Markley, 2020) reads the failed movement for a City of Eagle's Landing as inaugurating the turn from colorblind, neoliberal secession characterized above to something quite different. In response to explicit concerns over rapid racial change and an emergent Black political regime, this movement sought to de-annex and reincorporate disproportionately white segments of the existing City of Stockbridge, with the explicit goal of maintaining white control over governance, community character, and future development. This movement directly anticipates the Buckhead movement in two important ways. First, it opens the door to secession from an existing city, which, prior to this point, was largely seen as overly risky. Second, it firmly breaks with the prior discourse of secession, which emphasized an ideological commitment to a certain *form* of government—i.e. a privatized, neoliberal, contract city. Rather than a vehicle for realizing a pre-constituted, though obviously flawed,

ideal of good governance for its own sake, secession through Eagle's Landing becomes a tool of racialized revanchism, of what we call *reactionary localism*, a means of responding directly to trespass against whiteness-as-property (Harris, 1993), a means of restoration in the face of perceived decline. As I will show later, however, this shift is not an innovation, merely a return to the earliest dreams of white secession in Atlanta, which emerge in the middle of the 20th century. In this reading, the neoliberal model is the aberration, disrupting—aesthetically, if not materially— a violent continuity in the boundary work of white territorial politics.

The second of this 2020 pair (Markley & Allums, 2020) extends this argument around reactionary localism to include a broader theory of social cleansing (Smith, 2001). To that end, we

> demonstrate how property, as an incubator of racialized material advantage, is a central vector for the post-crisis inflammation of white nationalist anxiety which feeds a postfascist turn in local politics. (p. 130)

We demonstrate how reactionary localism "functions as a stabilizing project of racial expulsion" (p. 130) and exclusion in instances wherein "whiteness is, or may be perceived to be, under threat from those who do not possess it…when nonwhites or other marginalized groups make material, social, and/or political gains" (p. 131) or various crises and dislocations in racial capitalism produce broader anxieties over white accumulation. This anxiety, we argue, "emanates from the ontological co-constitution of race and value under racial capitalism" (p. 141). Thus revanchist 'social cleansing strategies' (Smith, 2011; 1998) such as apartment demolition, overpolicing, or boundary work, are deployed to quash threats to localized whiteness. This extended theory of reactionary localism

particularly informs Chapter 5, wherein I pursue an account of authoritarian urbanism, while Chapter 3 builds on the spatial theorization of whiteness-as-property that we begin to articulate in these two pieces to construct a conceptual framework around boundary work.

Crucially, both pieces feature arguments that seek to carefully link neoliberalism to reactionary, revanchist, or—as we contend in Markley & Allums (2020)—postfascist politics in a way that resist the popular understanding based in mutual negation. In other words, we seek to come to terms with the various, contradictory ways in which neoliberal urbanism is not simply replaced or invalidated by more explicitly racialized, nativist, protectionist, or exclusionary efforts at the "purification of urban space" (MacLeod, 2002, p. 255). Rather, we offer an analysis of white reaction that places it firmly in the wake of neoliberal privation, such that

> the violent politics of revanchism is the sinister underbelly of neoliberal urbanism, one of its "accidents." The heightened inter-urban competition for investment, tourists, and wealthy residents necessitated by neoliberalism impels city boosters to manufacture an idealized image of their cities. (Markley & Allums, p. 134)

This simulacral production is accomplished, as we demonstrate, by a revanchist urban authoritarianism, which seeks to "remove the internal 'threats'" to racialized accumulation (Markley & Allums, p. 134) in a conjuncture wherein, as Wendy Brown (2015) notes, the very demos—the very legitimacy of a demos at all—itself is being unmade. This complex interplay between neoliberalism and authoritarianism structures no small part of the nested investigations into the Buckhead City Movement and secession democracy which concurrently unfold in the following chapters.

In a sharp pivot from this focus on authoritarianism and reactionary whiteness, the last and most recent of the published works that bear some mention here offers quite a different engagement with the figure of secession (Allums, Markley, & Hafley, 2021). More specifically, it approaches the broader phenomenon of secession democracy from an oblique angle, neither inside nor wholly outside, which is to say from the perspective of a Black secession movement in Atlanta caught up in what Klay & Hill (2023, p. X) call the "predatory rhetorics of urban development." Here, we are forced to reckon with the limits of a Black politics predicated exclusively on the dream of unprecedented success in an interurban (Harvey, 1985) game always-already stacked in favor of white capital (Allums et al., 2021). If Black communities refuse to engage in the broader secessionary politics, they are left further behind in a race to the bottom of austerity politics and commercial development. If, however, they turn to secession as a defensive mechanism to ward off this fate, they are neither guaranteed the right to enact a secession (a right which is, for white communities, very nearly *de rigueur*) nor positioned to meaningfully compete against capital-dense white enclaves in a brute landscape of racially-differentiated valuation and appreciation (see Markley et al., 2021). In probing the limits of the new secession as a technique for self-determination, we are faced again with the reality that its utility as such is always-already predicated on the assumption that others must lose out, that it only functions as such on behalf of certain communities. I can easily imagine a further project which departs from this general analysis and, drawing on Black Geographies and theories of Black place-making, articulates an alternative vision of the future, of the present, of communal possibility in the wreckage of urban racial capitalism. For better or worse, this is not that project.

Finally, in simultaneous preparation are two co-authored manuscripts that disparately engage the centrality of crime to the Buckhead movement and thus to urban governance writ large. These are in addition to the manuscripts which constitute the preponderance of the present work. The fist, with Matt Harris, advances the literature on post-foundational geographies (as, e.g., in Landau et. al, 2021) by demonstrating how the invocation of crisis authorizes and forecloses certain types of politics. When Buckhead is seen as being in crisis, more authoritarian and revanchist efforts at social control are legitimized, subsumed under a racialized secessionist project. The second manuscript is with Jay Atkins and probes the function of police power (Neocleous 2021) in reproducing infrastructures and territories of white accumulation in Buckhead and at the Old Atlanta Prison Farm site, which will house the much-protested Cop City facility. In both cases, the work seeks to reckon with authoritarian responses to perceived threats against hegemonic orders of capital and politics in a moment when the contradictions inherent in each are rendered more transparent through precarity, pandemic, and protest.

CHAPTER 3

BOUNDARY WORK: GENEALOGICAL GEOGRAPHIC MATERIALISM & THE PERSISTANCE OF RACIAL CAPITALIST SPACE[4]

[4] Allums, C.A. To be submitted to *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*

Abstract

This chapter develops a theory of boundary work to link instances of secession to other spatial practices—such as gerrymandering, redlining, and annexation—and ground these practices in the possessive, material geographies of whiteness. I offer a critique of existing accounts of boundary change in geography and urban studies as largely descriptive and thus unsuited to the work of challenging historical and emergent inequalities across boundaries. Building from work by W.E.B. du Bois and others on the dialectics of race and Cornel West's materialist theory of race, this work provides geographers a conceptual language for critically analyzing white territorial projects under racial capitalism.

Introduction

In the last several decades, social scientific work on the spatial legacies and material practices of white supremacy in the US has proliferated widely. Scholars have tackled the various vestiges of redlining, white flight, tax revolts, sundown towns, and annexation among broader analyses of settler colonialism and racial capitalism (Connor, 2018; Kelly, 2022; Kruse, 2005; Williams, 2020). In geography, such impulses have been perhaps best expressed in the strand of anti-racist literature which builds upon the intervention of Moreton Robinson's (2015) theory of white possession (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Inwood, 2019, 2018; Inwood & Bonds, 2017). This emergent work deftly links various sites of white supremacist—and, particularly, white counterrevolutionary—political and territorial activity under an analysis of what Bonds (2020) names *the possessive geographies of whiteness*.

One recent and particularly evocative example of the sort of possessive geographies of which Inwood, Bonds, and others write so urgently is the proposed Buckhead City, the potential secession of which has generated significant media attention from both local and national media over the past several years. The Buckhead community sits roughly in the northern third of the City of Atlanta, just south of the City of Sandy Springs. It is home to approximately 100,000 residents, of whom close to 2/3 are white, a proportion which differs substantially from the remainder of the city (Ruch, 2020). Indeed, the City of Atlanta—even including Buckhead's large white community—is roughly 50% Black; almost 2/3 of the city is non-white. Median home values in Buckhead almost double those across the larger city, while the median earner in Buckhead brings home over $100,000 per year (Ruch, 2020). It is home to a large and still growing commercial district and boasts

the largest shopping mall in the southeastern US (Durrett, 2014). While other areas in the metro (one thinks of Decatur, East Atlanta Village, the Beltline, even far-flung Alpharetta) may boast newer amenities and attractions, hipper restaurants, and better bars, the cultural and commercial heart of Atlanta remains in Buckhead—even if only by symbolic inertia

But Buckhead was not always part of Atlanta. Its annexation in the 1950s was part of a broader project to temper anxieties around waxing Black political power in the City Too Busy to Hate. Anxiety around the implications of an impending majority-Black electorate and the desire to uphold a white supremacist social order in the city spurred city and state leaders to pursue "a spatial fix to thwart black political power" (Connor, 2015, p. 442). This fix took the form of Black vote dilution via the annexation of Buckhead, a project which was realized in 1951 by an act of the state legislature. Interestingly, this focus on choosing voters as a viable technology of white hegemonic power itself prefigures the fundamental logics of the new secession movement as well as broader trends in repressive state politics in Georgia and elsewhere (see, e.g., Manheim & porter, 2018; Woods, 2020).

Fundamental to this entire exercise is the fact that the making of cities is zero-sum, rival. In other words, that which one city possesses or directs—in territory, commercial development, or political power—another city cannot. This, perhaps more so than any other single fact, orients the attitude of this work towards the long shadow of the City of Buckhead. A 2021 report in the Atlanta Journal Constitution (Capelouto & Peebles, 2021) more precisely articulates the stakes of the potential de-annexation and secession of Buckhead. The City of Buckhead, as currently proposed, would "take nearly 20% of Atlanta's population and become the 10th largest city in Georgia" while also removing "about 40% of the assessed value of the city of Atlanta's property off the books." The

resulting city would be almost 75% white, (currently the City of Atlanta is roughly one-third white), which would make it even whiter than well-known enclaves like Johns Creek and Sandy Springs. As one leader of the resistance to Buckhead secession told me, “it doesn't take much, much analysis to see that forming a city that's 78% white out of a city that's majority African American is going…to change things substantially.”

Such a change is not simply ocular or cultural but also economic and, of course, political. Indeed, Buckhead City would have the second highest median income of any city in the state. Also at stake is considerable property tax revenue. The AJC report finds that assessed value of all the real estate in Atlanta currently totals nearly $35 billion, according to Fulton County Tax Assessor’s data. About 41% of that — over $14 billion — is in Buckhead. With its high-end shopping offerings, Buckhead has always had a strong commercial tax base; the most valuable piece of property is popular Lenox Square mall, valued at nearly $400 million by the county.

A recent study by opposition groups in Atlanta finds similar risks to the City of Atlanta and the broader region (Koski, Clower, & Waters, 2021), as “secession would lead to a net fiscal loss somewhere between $80 million to $116 million annually, with even more money lost for Atlanta schools” (Mock, 2021b, para. 24). The loss of such valuable commercial and residential property could quite literally collapse the City of Atlanta, further diluting Black political and economic power in an increasingly fractured landscape. An opponent of Buckhead City contends that Buckhead secession, in addition to being ineffectual, would prove disastrous not just for the City of Atlanta but for the metropolitan region and the state as a whole:

> What bothers me is…[t]o take the step of allowing a part of a city that has been instrumental in allowing that city to fund improvements in the area and [is implicated in] bonding and pension obligations and infrastructure that has been—that you borrowed against future tax dollars…The complications are just so damn enormous compared to the chance of being able to do something to address what you say is the reason for wanting to split up.

Due to shared bond debt, Buckhead secession could not only wreck the bond rating of the City of Atlanta itself but also—by setting precedent around secession from an existing city—has the potential also to destroy the bond rating of every city in the state of Georgia (Mock, 2021b; Pendered, 2018). Moody's has warned that such secessions are "credit negative for local governments in Georgia generally because they establish a precedent that the state can act to divide local tax bases, potentially lowering the credit quality of one city for the benefit of another" (Pendered, 2018, para. 6). Other possibilities and certainties for harm will percolate through the later chapters of this dissertation; for now, let us say simply that the implications for those left behind in a Buckhead deannexation—the less wealthy and the less white of the City of Atlanta, of course, but also the broader metro region and the state itself—would be immediate and substantial across multiple valences.

Why then does Buckhead seek to go its own way? As I have suggested above, the key lies in the will to possession which structures white territoriality. Indeed, the Buckhead City movement represents what the geographer Andrew Baldwin understands as "a speculative hedge against devaluation both of the real-estate asset price and its underlying value: whiteness." In the case of Buckhead City, perceived threats to the value of white assets, to the continuity of white accumulation include both nebulous concerns over crime

and public safety in the commercial districts of Buckhead and proposed zoning changes that would disrupt the homogeneity of single-family residential zoning in this wealthiest portion of the City of Atlanta.[5]

In March of this year, after a failed full court press to sway key legislators in the final hours, the Buckhead City Committee recognized that an effective stalemate had emerged in the battle over Buckhead; they conceded that the chances of success, at least in the short term, were vanishingly small. While the movement is nominally on hold until at least the end of Governor Brian Kemp's current term, the seriousness—and, indeed, approval—with which Buckhead City secession has been treated by some local, state, and even national politicians suggests that the need for critical responses to the new secession has not been diminished in the years since the 2005 secession of the City of Sandy Springs, which inaugurated the ongoing regime of white secession in Atlanta. Indeed, in the last two decades, efforts towards such racially-motivated territorial games have only become more antagonistic and authoritarian, echoing broader political trends over the same period.

Thus, the aim of this work is to begin to explicitly link the making and remaking of territorial boundaries through secession and annexation to the broader body of literature on the possessive geographies of whiteness. My argument in what follows is that such a project is necessary in order to offer a forceful corrective to the typically descriptive geographic literature on local boundary-making, that we require in its stead a genealogical materialist analysis of boundary work. To that end, this paper proceeds first by clarifying

[5] Atlanta, it should be noted, is one of the fastest growing metros in the country in the midst of a significant crisis of housing affordability. Immergluck (2022) has called it a "red hot city" for just this reason, and the proposed zoning changes in the Buckhead area are intended to alleviate some of the tremendous pressure on the current housing stock, allowing the development of denser, multi-family housing. Buckhead residents—both supporters of secession and their opponents—have resisted this proposal vigorously, attempting to disguise a brute and self-interested defense of property values and racialized exclusivity with flimsy, essentialist appeals to community identity.

the significance of whiteness to the possessive geographies of racial capitalism. I then briefly consider the implications of such an understanding of property for the image of freedom under [neo]liberal white democracy. Following this, the paper turns to an engagement with W.E.B. du Bois' dialectics of the veil, offering a novel spatial reading which seeks to territorialize the concept and methodologically operationalize it as a modality of what Cornel West calls genealogical materialism. In the wake of this intervention, I render a two-part critique, seeking to [un]ground (Landau et al., 2021) and unbound (Jones, 2009) the practice of racially-motivated boundary change in Atlanta and complicate the body of urban geographic scholarship which has to date been the main scholarly engagement with such efforts.

Whiteness and Racial Capitalism

The interrelation of race (racism) and capital (capitalism) has received some substantial theoretical treatment from urban scholars over the last decades, even as the literature on local municipal boundary change has largely steered clear of such considerations. The preponderance of this former body of scholarship deals in some way with—and contributes to the resurgence of—racial capitalism as a central theoretical apparatus in contemporary social inquiry (see Chakravartty & da Silva, 2012; Kelley, 2019; Kelly, 2022; Markley et al., 2020; Ranganathan, 2016). The theoretical throughline interconnecting these engagements is, of course, the singular intervention of Cedric Robinson (1983/2000) into the materialist philosophy of race.

Robinson's *Black Marxism* lays out the initial structure of a theory of Black Marxism as a counter to both vulgar Marxism and non-materialist theories of race. He

critiques the objectivist tendencies within certain strands of Marxism and Hegelianism which have led to false assumptions about rationality, universality, and proletarian consciousness. The incisive, heterodox account he offers of both race and capital as mutually-imbricated, world-historical forces is just as compelling today as when it was first composed. Complicating accounts that treat race as either epiphenomenal to or as a post hoc alteration of capitalist relations and categories, Robinson argues that race has been a central logic of capitalism since its earliest manifestations because—crucially—the drive to racialize prefigures the development of capitalism on the world historical stage.

Capitalism, thusly rendered, was always-already racial capitalism and, further, has been inseparable from (though, obviously, non-identical to) the colonial enterprise from its very beginnings in the soil of the European feudal order. Yet, as Winant suggests in the prior chapter, the particular forms of racial difference and the structures of power that articulate to them are always shifting, even if the racializing imperative preceded capitalist development and, in particular, the institution of chattel slavery (Baptist, 2014).

As I have suggested above, Robinson's intervention has been taken up widely; his thought is currently experiencing a considerable reinvigoration as geographers and other critical scholars attempt to reckon with widening racial inequality, recurrent epistemic and bodily violence, persistent colorblind policy failure, and resurgent white supremacy in the context of their collective, material imbrication with the repressed racial histories of this nation. Of course, drawing attention to the imbrication of racial difference with the accumulation of capital and the exclusions of capitalism is not limited solely to those who have adopted Robinson's specific formulation in recent years. A broader and deeper tradition exists. Manning Marable (2015), for instance, tracks the capitalist

underdevelopment of Black communities in the US. Much earlier, W.E.B. du Bois (1935/1998) himself—while perhaps better known by the broader public for his activism and teaching in Atlanta—squarely positions what we can now call racial capitalism at the center of both plantation economies and the collapse of Reconstruction.

The vast majority of the work I have engaged above—what we might characterize, for the sake of simplicity, as constituting or anticipating a racial capitalist turn in social inquiry—is concerned with the racialized production of surplus populations and geographies, the ways in which these are reproduced by and subordinated to the needs of capital. Thus we are met with underdevelopment, disaster, dispossession, vulnerability as our objects of concern—these are all, of course, deeply important and depressingly timely. What I wish to suggest, however, following the very sharp intervention of Goetz, Damiano, & Williams (2019), is that just as important to the project of countering racial capitalism is an intense concern for the spaces of overdevelopment, for the logics of possession—those materializations of what Du Bois (1897) names the pale world. Indeed, to paraphrase Robin Kelley (2017), racial capitalism could not exist without the (re)production of whiteness as an organizing political and material force.

Prior work around whiteness per se has carefully detailed how certain groups of people have been rendered as white (Roediger, 2006; Allen, 2012; Lopez, 1997); how whiteness functions as a political bulwark (Coates, 2015; Inwood, 2018; Lipsitz, 2006; Olson, 2001; 2004; 2008); how whiteness appears as an object of desire (Seshadri-Crooks, 2002; 1997); how Blackness operates negatively vis a vis whiteness at the social and ontological levels (Du Bois, 2003; Winant, 2004; Olson, 2004; Weheliye, 2014)); and, of course, how regimes of racial differentiation and power come together to do violence on

behalf of the pale world (Du Bois, 1920/2016; 2017; Gilmore, 2002; Robinson, 2000; Marable, 2015; Winant, 2002).

We can say, following recent geographic scholarship, that whiteness under racial capitalism is simultaneously a social relation of power, an embodied marker onto which social values are projected, and a normative invisible around which society and its aims are structured (Baldwin, 2012; Baker, 2017; Bonnett, 1997; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Shaw, 2006; Vanderbeck, 2006; 2008). Indeed, whiteness is a deeply spatial phenomenon that is constituted and reproduced alongside notions of property and territory (Bonds, 2020; Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Hattam, 2018; Inwood, 2018; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Harris, 1993) and emphasizes the inherent right to exclude (Roy, 2016).

As Cheryl Harris (1993) contends in her foundational essay on the subject, whiteness functions as a form of property, and as such, whiteness confers material benefits upon its owners. These benefits, however, are contingent upon maintaining the relative value of whiteness. Thus, as Inwood (2019) argues, as the property of whiteness is perceived to be under threat from those who do not possess it, a collective interest among whites to safeguard their property serves as a powerful catalyst for mobilizing reactionary movements (see Taylor 2019 and Markley et al. 2020 for complementary accounts).Throughout her essay, Harris pursues "the evolution of whiteness from color to race to status to property" (p. 1780); we can see elements of a parallel genealogy in the literature on whiteness abstracted above.[6]

Harris' central insight has been taken up, reworked, or otherwise reflected widely across the social sciences. Some recent interventions have emphasized its central role in

[6] Sections of this paragraph were previously published as "The new suburban secession: A postfascist turn in Atlanta's cityhood movement" in *Metropolitics* (2020).

the political economy of racial capitalism (Leong, 2013; Mills, 2017; Roediger, 2019). Similarly, others have used it to complicate identity-based theorizations of whiteness (Baldwin, 2012; Lipsitz, 2006; Owen, 2007; see also Haider, 2018). Others still have used Harris' work in anticolonial projects, specifically to explore various challenges to indigenous sovereignty over territories, resources, genetics, and identities which have been—and in some cases, remain—the desire and property of whiteness in settler states (Reardon & TallBear, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Seawright, 2014).

Harris' whiteness is one "that can be both analogized to conventional forms of property and literally converted to those forms" (Leong, 2013, p. 2154). Harris captures the resultant hegemony of whiteness as follows:

> The property interest in whiteness has proven to be resilient and adaptive to new conditions. Over time it has changed in form, but it has retained its essential exclusionary character and continued to distort outcomes…by favoring and protecting settled expectations of white privilege. The law expresses the dominant conception of "rights," "equality," "property," "neutrality," and "power": rights mean shields from interference; equality means formal equality; property means the settled expectations that are to be protected; neutrality means the existing distribution, which is natural; and, power is the mechanism for guarding all of this.

Thus, in Harris' rendering, the central transgression against this regime of whiteness is not passing (as in racial ambiguity which defies the ocular production and hierarchization of racial difference [see Omi & Winant, 2014]), but "trespassing" (p. 1711; see also Wolfe, [2001])) as a violation of private ownership and exclusive control. Indeed, in comments by

the leaders of the proposed City of Buckhead, we can already identify concern over such transgressions as propelling the secessionary drive.

This question of whiteness as property has been effectively spatialized through engagements with possession (Bonds, 2020; Inwood, 2018; Lipsitz, 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2015, Sullivan, 2006). In general, this geographic work positions whiteness as property—underwritten by the racial capitalist state (Pulido, 2017)—as central to the "possessive geographies of white supremacy' (Bonds, 2020). Just as dispossession (see Bonds & Inwood, 2016) is a necessary condition of possibility for white supremacist extraction, possession as a concept emphasizes the content and activity of whiteness per se, which is, as Du Bois laments, "the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!" (1920/2016, p. 18).

Within geography, Bonds' (2020) conceptual deployment of possessive geographies of white supremacy is perhaps clearest. Rooted in critiques of colonial and liberal territoriality (see, e.g., MacPherson, 2011; Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and a generous engagement with Cheryl Harris' pathbreaking work on whiteness as property, Bonds specifically emphasizes Moreton-Robinson's (2015) possessive logics to demonstrate that the production of space under racial capitalism is mediated by the white compulsion to possess, control, and protect property in whiteness. Thus, more than simply the "outcome of white possession and investments in whiteness" we should understand possessive geographies of white supremacy as "the material spaces made through the logics of possession that reproduce white propertied power" (Bonds, 2020, p. 784).

The Form of Life of White Democracy

Property is thus a central, constituent element of the 'form of life' (Cole & Ferrarese, 2018) of what Joel Olson (2004) calls white democracy under racial capitalism. For Olson, the concept of white democracy captures whiteness as a sociopolitical norm and material force which discourages extensive democratic politics by reducing citizenship to a white identity category rather than a universal source of empowerment for political subjects. Crucially, disenfranchisement here is not simply a limitation at the ballot box, but a broader system of valuation and exclusion, a 'form of life' predicated on white property, which is itself American life *per se*.

The use of 'form of life' here is meant to emphasize the extent to which the discursive, material, and ideological valences of property, both structural and quotidian, are given equal analytical weight in this work. In this, I follow Cornel West, who calls for a materialist social theory of race which confronts "candidly the myriad of effects and consequences (intended and unintended, conscious and unconscious) of power-laden and conflict-ridden social practices" (West, 1987). Indeed, 'form of life,' which Cole and Ferrarese (p. 105) borrow from Marx, is unique in its ability to convene multiple registers of capitalist experience, relation, and activity. Thus white possession, as propertied power, is never pure relation or logic, never only privilege or practice—it is also territorialized, made spatial and bounded, governed and policed (Blomley, 2016; Elden, 2010).

While a central element of the spatial form of life of white democracy in the present, property has occupied a similar position vis-a-vis the broader [neo]liberal political tradition. Macpherson (2011, p. 143) names "the right to individual property in goods and estate…the right not only to own but to acquire" as the basic economic right under what

he calls ‘possessive individualism,’ but which is also the liberalism of Hobbes and Locke. Ellen Meiksins Wood (2012, p. 263) gives a more involved survey of property in the liberal tradition:

> Ireton (like Hobbes and many others) took it for granted that the surest way to sustain the interests of the propertied classes was to insist that property, or at least its existing form and distribution, was simply a human convention, not derived from natural right but upheld by the constitution and tradition. Locke, by contrast, sets out to demonstrate that property itself does indeed exist by right of nature, and he not only denies that the notion of natural right represents a threat to the existing social order but even finds a way of turning the concept of natural right to the defence of property and inequality.

Losurdo (2014, pp. 120-1) perfectly encapsulates this contradictory primacy of property to [neo]liberalism, arguing first that the “sphere of legality is the sphere of respect for private property, while violence is defined in the first instance by its violation.” Yet he immediately complicates this rendering:

> On closer examination…We are confronted with a society and intellectual tradition which, far from being inspired by a superstitious respect for property and property rights in general, in fact promoted and legitimized [racialized] expropriations…the category of ‘property-owning individualism’ seems to focus attention exclusively on the white community in the capitalist metropolis, and on the conflict between property-owners and non-property owners.

Thus, property under [neo]liberalism is a narrow and mediated relation, which relies in many cases on the denial of all forms of property and tenure non-identical to itself (Losurdo

suggests that we might accurately replace all instances of property with expropriation in discussions of liberalism). And yet, around this particular, ideological relation of racialized property cohere the first principles of [neo]liberal society.

Within geography, the work of Laura Pulido (2017; 2016) is particularly notable for bringing racial capitalism into conversation with the long-standing geographical interest in [neo]liberalism. On the question of Flint, MI, she contends that the racial capitalist

> disaster is the result of the local state acting within the context of neoliberalism. Specifically, Flint has been operating under austerity politics due to its abandonment by capital. As such, the case highlights the larger historical, political, and economic context in which vulnerability, contamination, and death are produced…My argument is that the people of Flint are so devalued that their lives are subordinated to the goals of municipal fiscal solvency. This constitutes racial capitalism because this devaluation is based on both their blackness and their surplus status, with the two being mutually constituted. It is no accident that US surplus populations are disproportionately nonwhite. (2016, p. 1)

This placement of racial capitalism at the center of the [neo]liberal project is not particular to Pulido; numerous other interventions mark their deadly imbrication (see Bhandar, 2018; Chakravartty & da Silva, 2012; Ince, 2018) Ranganathan (2016) makes an argument deeply consonant with Pulido's. Also taking Flint as her setting, Ranganathan demonstrates that the tragedy which continues to take place there is inseparable not just from racial capitalism, but from [neo]liberalism per se. At the heart of it all is what Ranganathan calls

the ‘making and taking’ of property under racial liberalism and racial capitalism, compounded by a response to the crisis which ignores this history.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that the question of property (more specifically, how to disrupt its sociospatial hegemony) sits also at the heart of the struggle for urban democracy (Blomley, 2004; Mitchell, 2003). Blomley’s *Unsettling the City* demonstrates just how the banal institution of private property structures our everyday experience of the city, but also how its legal and relational forms are at the heart of urban exclusion and injustice. Harvey (2008, p. 32) sees the hegemony of property as responsible for the pacification of radical urban politics:

> This is a world in which the neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism, and its cognate of political withdrawal from collective forms of action, becomes the template for human socialization…The defence of property values becomes of such paramount political interest that, as Mike Davis points out, the home-owner associations in the state of California become bastions of political reaction, if not of fragmented neighbourhood fascisms

Following these scholars, it is my contention that the drive to accumulate and protect property is, if not singularly, at least predominantly responsible for the sort of fragmented landscapes (e.g. of the new secession) with which we must reckon in contemporary urban configurations. And when we understand property under racial capitalism as always-already shot through with white territoriality, we are compelled also to reckon with the possessive geographies and boundaries which are reproduced through its hegemony.

Geographers and other critical social scientists and humanists remain well-attuned to the ways in which whiteness has functioned—continues to function—as a stabilizing or

reactionary force against multi-racial, liberatory, or otherwise counter-hegemonic political projects (Horne, 2014, 2022; Inwood, 2019; Luger, 2022). Thus, we encounter whiteness as, variously, counterrevolution, backlash, or revanchism along a particular teleological trajectory.; in such a reading, whiteness is always responding. Nevertheless, this singular focus leaves relatively unperturbed the extent to which whiteness is itself an active project, one which does not merely react to the content of progressive or radical movements, but which itself imagines particular worlds, makes them more or less real. As Baldwin (p. 177) rightly insists, we cannot be content in exclusively consigning critiques of whiteness to historical explanation; there is, as I suggest in the introduction, an anticipatory element which mediates the possessive geographies of white supremacy, "a speculative hedge against devaluation both of the real-estate asset price and its underlying value: whiteness."

The future, Baldwin argues, is at least as important a register within which to think the construction and contestation of whiteness. But how does the future—i.e., the unrealized—become real? The future, for Baldwin, is

> an imagined time that is yet-to-come. The future can be understood to follow sequentially from a past-present trajectory, or it can be understood as a form of absent presence. From tropes of uncertainty, Utopia, apocalypse, prophesy, hope, fear, possibility and potentiality, the future shapes the present in all manner of ways. (p. 172)

Just as historical events and geographies shape our presents and futures, futurity articulates to the production and contestation of the now. When the horizon of white freedom is located exclusively within white property itself, this speculative hedge against devaluation predominates.

Dialectics of the Veil: Genealogical Geographic Materialism

How then to contend with this especial form of life? Sartre (1968) insists that a method must meet its object, that our approaches to social inquiry must map the contours of the problems at hand. More particularly—though in a decidedly similar vein—Cornel West (1987) argues that, as regards the operation of racial oppression and exclusion in contemporary society, we require an approach that is capable of grappling with the complex interplay of cultural, material, psychic, and historical forces—a task to which all prior liberal, conservative, and Marxist approaches are unsuited. We must, West contends in his widely overlooked essay "Race and Social Theory: Towards a Genealogical Materialist Analysis," construct and deploy a position from which to understanding racial oppression, one which—if pursued seriously—cannot help but to

> raise fundamental questions regarding the very conditions for the possibility of the modern West, the diverse forms and styles of European rationality and the character of the prevailing modern secular mythologies…that guide everyday practices around the world.

This genealogical materialist orientation towards the study of racial oppression comprises three methodological moments. These are the *genealogical*, the *micro-institutional*, and the *macro-structural*. The first is an historically-oriented inquiry into the "discursive and extra-discursive conditions for the possibility of racist practices," i.e. a radical genealogy of white supremacy *per se*. The second concerns what we might, following Landau et al. (2021), refer to as the grounding practices by which these discourses and logics of whiteness are reproduced and contested in everyday life. The third and final moment orients us materially to those "modes of overdetermined class exploitation, state repression

and bureaucratic domination" that we might understand presently as constituting the structure of racial capitalism.

While West does not cite the latter's work, it is nevertheless my contention that W.E.B. du Bois anticipates the spirit of West's genealogical materialism in his philosophy of the veil. Du Bois (1903/2003) initially theorizes the veil in *The Souls of Black Folk*. It is at one and the same time that boundary which separates the Black and white worlds and a second-sight, a double-consciousness on the part of black people; the two are distinct but the coherence of the one relies upon the solidity of the other. The centrality of the veil in Du Bois' thought does not suggest that other forms of non-white difference are impossible (indeed, in Du Bois' later essay "The Souls of White Folk," he gives an account of whiteness that is quite explicitly less focused on its black other), nor that these are any less worthy of acknowledgement or capable of generating struggles for recognition and justice. Nevertheless, Du Bois does posit the veil as a particular and powerful form of difference critical for an understanding of American history and politics. Like West's methodological ideal, the veil is both individual and structural, material and discursive, historically determined and geographically dynamic, dialectical but unorthodox. It is constantly being reproduced, grounded, and differentiated and, perhaps most crucially, it binds white and Black worlds in a relation of concurrent interdependence and antagonism, accumulation and exclusion.

Many decades later, Howard Winant takes Du Bois' initial conceptualization and builds out a materialist theory of history, relying primarily on the synthesis of two additional concepts: rupture and overdetermination. Rupture occurs when the forces of the veil reach such tension and contradiction that they can no longer be contained. Winant

points to the conjunctural periods during and after the Civil War and World War II as moments of rupture, where the veil was necessarily remade in the registers of both identity and social structure. Key, though, is that such remaking is not a post-crisis diminution of the power of the veil or the significance of race. This persistence is due largely, according to Winant, to the overdetermined structure of the veil per se:

> In a general way I adopt an 'overdetermination' approach to the problem of the dialectic of the veil. In other words, I argue that the concept of the veil is effective in analyzing the depth and breadth of race and racism because it so seamlessly links the numerous sites where they are present in US society (and ultimately on a global scale, though that is not my main subject here). Certainly the veil divides the human psyche and figures the human body; yet it also fissures soul and nation, collectivity, polity, history, and culture. Since every US institution as well as every identity is partitioned by race and racism, fractured by the veil, and since at the same time the entire society owes its existence to the workings of race…the concept necessarily takes on an accretive quality. The veil signifies a profound social structure that has been built up for centuries, accumulating among the infinite contradictions of race and racism as they have shaped our identities and social organization. (p. 5)

The addition of overdetermination into the theoretical mix produces an even more robust dialectics of the veil. Winant describes its potential, for instance, to diagnose and oppose reductive and ahistorical accounts of race which seek to reduce it to identity. He writes:

> The deep dialectic of race and racism must be affirmed against those who consider these themes anachronistic…The belief is commonplace, the idea is everywhere, from right to left, from integrationism to nationalism, etc., that race is declining in

> significance, that it is an outmoded analytical concept…This position must be challenged in different ways: by disputing it through historical analysis; by contrasting its variations among nations as they have emerged in recent years; and by exploring the interplay between global racial dynamics and national racial formations. But most centrally, the idea that we are somehow 'beyond race' must be challenged in terms of theoretical and political analysis. Vital as it was to overcome the old systems of racial oppression, it is just as important to understand today that new anti-racist battle-lines have appeared. The concept of the veil, the dialectics of the veil, still provide our most effective tool in the struggle to achieve racial justice and democracy. (p. 14)

Winant's intervention is invaluable for us here. In particular, this reading of the veil helps us to link sites and systems of oppression across time and space, a project that becomes increasingly difficult—and necessary--in a post-colorblind world, one which obfuscates and dissembles just as much as it reproduces the relations and formations of the past. Indeed, James Baldwin condenses the challenge of intervening in such a context into characteristically brutal prose: "[t]he horror is that America changes all the time, without ever changing at all" (see Glaude, Jr., 2020).

More recently, Joel Olson has sublated this historical material theory of the veil into a narrower critique of American democracy. Keeping in view the specific problem of racial bipolarity, Olson argues, is particularly important in response to popular narratives around increasing diversity and multiculturalism beyond white and Black, which some offer as evidence for the declining significance of white/Black racial antagonism. Olson borrows from Du Bois' original engagement with the veil to think through white and Black

'worlds' and tracks Winant's theorizing the dialectical (bipolar) struggle between these oppositional categories of political (i.e. not biological, cultural, etc.) power. Whiteness, in Olson's reading, is thus rendered—via the practice of white democracy—a set of power relations and a hegemonic mechanism for ordering and bounding geographies of difference, of reproducing the veil.

As Winant has done for history and Olson for politics, so I hope to do for geography, that is: to render du Bois' evocative dialectics spatially, to reckon it alongside the critiques of property, discourses of secession, and futurities and geographies of possessive whiteness I have sketched above. A critical encounter with the possessive geographies of whiteness must hold in tension the at-times contradictory truths that old systems of oppression have indeed ruptured and that new systems of contradiction and co-articulation are constantly being imagineered, that the interrelation of the two processes is overdetermined such that their interplay cannot be reduced to one of either identity or negation (see West, 1987). It must contend with the reality that the lingering veil is both psychic, discursive, material; that it has been realized through a vast and complex accretion, that each instantiation of racial formation and exclusion is both overdetermined with respect to the broader dialectics of the veil and constitutive of that dialectic across time and space (Winant, 2004). To approach the sort of complexities I address herein without this explicit foundation is to risk lapsing into either reductive ahistoricism or idealist identitarianism, neither of which is sufficient to undergird the project of racial justice and democracy that Winant rightly identifies as our necessary struggle.

Thus, as a conceptual and theoretical heuristic for reading possessive geographies, the veil realizes the onto-epistemological promise of genealogical materialism, which

Cornel West rightly and presciently identifies as the necessary point of departure for social theories of race. It also gives us a theoretical object with which to think, in post-foundational terms, the [un]grounding of racialized boundaries and boundary-making.

Boundary Work: A Critique of Descriptive Geography

Atlanta's history of racially motivated boundary change is both well-known and thoroughly documented (see, e.g., Connor, 2015; Kruse, 2006; Rutheiser, 1996; Stone, 1989). Bayor (1996) goes so far as to suggest that, indeed, this will to reterritorialization may be the defining feature of a coherent, discernibly Atlantan political culture in the 20th century. Cogent examples abound. Chattahoochee Plantation is one of the more evocative. Incorporated in 1961 and expanded by the state legislature in 1968, the city was intended to serve as a bulwark against Atlanta's potential incursion across the Chattahoochee River into Cobb County where many white flight families had landed over the prior years. After expansion, the city was 30 miles long while only ten feet across in most places, following the county boundary across its entire length. It had no residents nor elected officials, but as state law precludes the crossing of incorporated boundaries in an annexation, Chattahoochee Plantation worked wonders for the broader constituency of suburban whiteness.

The charter of Chattahoochee Plantation was eventually revoked in 1995 due to its transparent disinterest in actual governance (though not before Sandy Springs attempted to join the city by annexation in 1989). Even if Atlanta's (and, now, Buckhead's) business and political elite have largely "sought to portray the city as tolerant and progressive," political leaders at the local and state levels continue to engage in spatial and political

projects intended to “thwart black political power” (Connor, 2015, p. 442), thus excluding “from their world by a vast veil” (Du Bois, 1903/2003, p. 8) that which might threaten the hegemony of whiteness. The mechanism of exclusion in all such cases is what I refer to as boundary work. Boundary work is a site of the dialectical activity of the veil, a mechanism by which its fissures are realized on the landscape, by which the veil is explicitly spatialized. Despite its utility in thinking the dialectics of the veil geographically, boundary work itself is a borrowed term.

Thomas Gieryn’s (1983) original treatise on the concept positions boundary work as an exercise in professional demarcation, a set of rhetorical and ideological styles and positions evinced “by scientists to distinguish their work and its products from non-scientific intellectual activities” alongside scientists’ “attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science (i.e., to its practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organization) for purposes of constructing a social boundary” (p. 782). Critically, boundary work is not the recognition of such differences or foundations as essential, but their active construction and contestation towards the pursuit of both institutional power, professional authority, and/or and material resources (Burri, 2008; Gieryn, 1983). This understanding of boundary work has been widely taken up, especially in science and technology studies (STS), and remains a broad, central touchstone for analyses of organizational and professional negotiation in the sciences and beyond (see, e.g., Clark et al., 2016; Langley et al., 2019; Mikes, 2011; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Nevertheless, the actual boundary in this construction is only ever figurative; my use of boundary work herein will attempt to both materialize and politicize the concept, while still maintaining the focus on active work as central to the negotiation of boundaries.

While the terminology of boundary work is borrowed from STS, my thinking on boundaries—both within this project and in general—owes a great deal to the work of geographer Reece Jones. Jones (2009) argues that boundaries should be understood as always inchoate—only partially formed and incomplete—and that boundary studies in geography should be concerned with tracing the bounding processes that result in categorical and spatial differentiation. This emphasis on the inchoate—Jones is very particular about this terminology—is meant to highlight

> the process of bounding rather than the already finished and fixed boundary. Boundaries are never finished or fixed, even if they appear to be, and must be re-fixed and reiterated to reify that perception. It is a *process* because of this ongoing necessity for re-fixing, rewriting and renegotiating the boundaries. (Jones, 2009, p. 180, emphasis in original)

It is precisely this concern for process with which that I am concerned, though the emphasis on work in my own formulation further emphasizes the importance of active human intervention. In other words, boundary work is not *just* a process, but a project, one which operates at the

I oppose my concept of boundary work to the body of literature concerned with local municipal boundary change, which has to date given the most attention to those activities which might be subsumed under this new conceptualization of boundary work, which is to say incorporation, annexation, and related forms of reterritorialization. The preponderance of this work descriptively treats the linked questions of why, how, and in what contexts such boundary changes tend to proliferate (Edwards, 2011; Smith, 2011; Smith, 2012), and broadly suggests that incorporation might be understood as pre-emptive,

particularly as a protectionist strategy in the face of an impending, hostile annexation (Hoch, 1985, 1981; Rigos & Spindler, 1991; Smith, 2011; Smith & Debbage, 2011; 2006). More recent work by Waldner & Smith (2015) partially contradicts this, arguing instead that new cities may form simply to escape the governance of the county that contains them, and are aided in doing so by pioneer cities that reduce what we might think of as barriers to entry for new cities. Nevertheless, even the most recent geographic investigations into boundary change (see, e.g., Durst, Wang, & Li, 2022) reproduce such tendencies. Here, the exclusionary boundary work of white communities is given some measure of implicit validity by constant reference to the 'threat' of annexation as preceding acts of secession.

In the vast majority of cases, this literature understands boundary changes through a quasi-evolutionary, progressive framework where such changes are simply rational responses to largely external provocation or stimuli in an uneven landscape of residential preference and intra-urban competition (Harvey, 1989). Smith & Debbage (2011, p. 569), for instance, assert that post-secession cities—what they name Newly Incorporated Municipalities or NIMs—"are not equally distributed nationally but spatially concentrated, in part, because local communities experience a 'clustering effect' that is prompted by a sort of herd mentality." Smith & Debbage (2006, p. 111) further bemoan the lack of attention from geographers to the "dramatic impacts on urban landscapes regarding tax rates, land use patterns, school districts, and the provision of other municipal services" implicit in the production of NIMs, but offer no real compelling reasons why various strands of geography should be concerned with such descriptive science other than its implicit spatiality. While race is discussed occasionally in the literature on boundary change (see, e.g., Durst, Wang, & Li, 2022), it is only ever epiphenomenal to the more

basic question of taxation, land use, and service provision and/or the technical aspects of annexation and incorporation. To wit: "newly incorporated cities have exclusionary characteristics along both social and economic dimensions" and yet "nuanced differences and similarities exist that make it difficult to support any sweeping generalizations (particularly regarding race and government spending)" (Smith & Debbage, 2011, p. 569). A robust geographical approach must seek further, must seek differently.

Framing the new secession as simply boundary change immediately positions us as only observers to the unfolding of a natural process, or, at least, a process which has an internal and transparent logic. In Jones' (2009) terms, this framing containerizes not only boundaries as such, but also the discourses, logics, and concepts deployed to ground them. Yet, just as the concept of environmental justice politicizes and denaturalizes passive discursive objects like pollution or environmental externalities, so too does boundary work help us to understand secession as a process which does not merely result in unfortunate 'exclusionary characteristics,' but which centers the production of racialized inequality as its fundamental horizon. I might better elucidate the distinction I am after here by thinking with Walter Benjamin. The literature on boundary change, to misappropriate Benjamin's aesthetic vernacular, "normatively fixes" our thinking "in the attitude of passive, privatized absorption" making each case of secession an "isolated instant in life, lacking effectivity, or potentially 'political'…significance" (Markus, 2001, p. 32). Boundary work, on the other hand, possesses a certain true aura (Benjamin, 1969); it charges each individual instance of secession with the significance of the broader tradition of boundary work, opening space for critique and political action beyond the fetishized object of the NIM.

Indeed, boundary work, in contradistinction to boundary change, begins to help us understand the balkanization of urban space, the fragmentation of local governance as a political project, racial (Omi & Winant, 2014) or otherwise, a technology of the broader imagineering (Rutheiser, 1996) which has shaped Atlanta for decades. In this sense, boundary work offers a postfoundational mechanism for reading both the literature on local municipal boundary change and the landscapes of secession themselves. For instance, boundary work deconstructs the false opposition between secession from a county and secession from a city, a distinction which is so critical to Buckhead's opponents. Another representative of CUA argues that:

> what happened with the incorporation of cities out of unincorporated counties, is that's a basket full of apples. And what we're talking about here [Buckhead] is a big fat orange. And, you know, to me, yeah, having somebody who's actually gone through the legal process of, you know, creating new cities. That's a pretty, pretty nice weapon to have in your in your toolbox. Totally. So no…I've not heard anybody express concern about what [Ed Lindsey, co-leader of CUA, former state representative, and one of the legislative architects of the Sandy Springs secession] may have worked on in the past, whether or not that undercuts whatever he might have to say, or whatever authority that he might have. Right?

Perhaps not. When we foreground work as an active politics of territorialization—instead of, for instance, focusing on the territorial object of the NIM or the nature of the administrative configuration from which the secession is to be effected—we bring into sharp relief a system that constantly reinvents new mechanisms for establishing and

maintaining possessive geographies of white supremacy (Bonds, 2020), of imagineering the veil. The road to Buckhead runs through Sandy Springs, but it begins elsewhere.

There is a further benefit to deploying boundary work over boundary change, namely that it allows us to emphasize salient linkages to instances of racial exclusion where groups of people—rather than borders themselves—have moved or been fixed. Boundaries can be worked even when they are not changed; we see as much in the histories of 20th century white flight, when white communities abandoned inner cities for suburban enclaves. We can easily understand, as I have suggested elsewhere, how white flight and the new secession are identical in aim and effect, differing only in the independent variable chosen. Boundary work also attunes us to more qualitative changes in borders. We might think of the institution of racial covenants along neighborhood borders (see Kelly, 2022). The borders, formal or informal as they may have been, did not change in such cases, but their purpose, their significance shifted meaningfully (see also Yancy, 2022).

We can, then, with only a bit of imagination, apply this general observation to the question of Buckhead. Rather than viewing the mid-century annexation and the potential contemporary de-annexation of Buckhead as mutually opposed, we can understand them as distinct moments of a broader logic of boundary work, which can achieve its ends equally in conglomeration and disintegration, in coming together and in pulling away. Extending this argument further, we can see that the new secession, racial covenants, segregation, and white flight, for instance, articulate to one another in much the same manner. The new secession reproduces the segregationist tendencies inherent in white flight without the requirement that residents actually relocate, achieving with exclusion what white flight accomplished with abandonment.

Conclusion

As I have shown throughout this article, the recent geographic work on the possessive geographies of whiteness offers both a useful hemerneutic for reading the geographies new secession as well as offering a critical theoretical response, through my development of boundary work, to the narrower descriptive literature on local municipal boundary change. Nevertheless, a problem persists, namely that secession does not go into this emergent theorization without remainder. That is, there is at least a nominal discontinuity: where possessive geographies emphasize the extension and/or crystallization of logics of ownership and control, secession requires, by definition, ceding territorial hegemony—or at least its potentiality.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that the literature on possessive geographies only allows for explicit and narrowly-defined projects of colonization whereby logics of possession are directly and linearly extended outward from some core territory. The framework is much subtler and more flexible than this. We might turn briefly to Taylor's (2019) work on Black homeownership. Rather than reading the post-Civil Rights extension of mortgage credit to Black homebuyers as a benign, if ultimately flawed, attempt at democratizing the central American technology of private wealth-building, Taylor positions this moment as one of "predatory inclusion" of Black people into fundamentally—perhaps irredeemably—white institutions. More importantly, she demonstrates that the power of white hegemony is eminently variable; it is able, for instance, to ensure uninterrupted returns to whiteness by both excluding and including, in turns, non-white populations.

The success of a white possessive territoriality, then, does not hinge on the holding of territory. Possession as an accumulative logic of racial capitalism can proceed apace even through managed retreat, through the loosing of lines, through rescaling just as through the capture of territory. Boundaries are not simply expanded but worked in complex and contradictory ways. Thus, the subtitle of this chapter, which calls for vigilance in the face of the persistence of racial capitalist space.

CHAPTER 4

SHAKY GROUND: A POST-FOUNDATIONAL CRITIQUE OF ATLANTA'S NEW SECESSION[7]

[7] Allums, C.A. To be submitted to *Geoforum.*

Abstract

This chapter produces a post-foundational reading of the discourses and material practices of the new secession in Atlanta. In response to Landau et al.'s (2021) provocation to [un]ground those sedimented practices and logics that reinforce unequal geographies, I demonstrate that the foundational elements that license secessionists politics are highly contingent and thus contestable. Working through the various processes and assumptions by which the new secession is achieved, I argue that the ontological ground of secession should not be taken for granted; rather, opponents of secession should critically pursue the taken-for-granted nature of ideas like democracy, efficiency, and scale that so often serve as ends-in-themselves rather than the grounds for true politics.

Introduction

In March of this year, a years-long effort to de-annex and then reincorporate Buckhead—a wealthy, white conglomeration of single-family neighborhoods and high-end commercial parcels—out of the remainder of the majority-Black City of Atlanta failed in a legislative vote. From its genesis in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Buckhead City movement garnered a great deal of national press for both its startling audacity and its poorly-disguised white chauvinism (see, e.g.). It also reignited debates over the seemingly unstoppable rash of municipal incorporations in the Atlanta metro area, a trend which I (Allums, 2017; Allums, Markley, & Hafley, 2022; Allums & Markley, 2020) and others (Connor, 2015; Kruse, 2006; Markley, 2018) have called secession, both for its immediate political valences and its deeper cultural ones.

While Atlanta boasts a long and diverse history of racially-motivated boundary change (see Bayor, 2000; Kruse, 2005), this new secession—the term I now prefer for this constellation of movements—is unique in some important ways. Unlike prior instances of boundary change in Atlanta, these movements are vocally colorblind (Connor, 2015), even as they reproduce possessive territories (Bonds, 2020) of whiteness and shore up white political hegemony across scales. They are, also, nominally participatory, which is to say that secession under this regime is only achievable through both legislative votes and popular referenda. Finally, as Godinez-Puig & Cornelissen (2023) demonstrate, such movements have measurably and rapidly increased inequality and segregation in the Atlanta metro (see also Highscmith, 2020).

While the Buckhead City movement is on hiatus until a future legislative session, the valences of secession as a broader political discourse remain significant for politics at

multiple scales in the US. Private school vouchers, for instance, offer subsidized secession from a public education. Offshoring and other tax evasion mechanisms allow the wealthiest Americans to secede from public responsibility and oversight. The Greater Idaho Movement, which seeks to relocate the Idaho/Oregon border by providing for the secession of multiple white, rural counties within Oregon, allowing these to join the Republican-dominated state of Idaho as a means of pre-empting democratic governance in Oregon.

Despite such compelling and concerning examples, secession, even in this broadest definition, remains severely understudied, especially—and curiously—within geography. This absence endures even in the face of robust geographic literatures on political economy, geopolitics, global suburbanisms, race, and urban governance more generally. What's more—as regards the more circumscribed definition of secession employed throughout this work, i.e., the new secession—existing urban and geographic scholarship on local municipal boundary change (see, e.g. Smith & Debbage, 2011, 2006) simply falls short in accounting for the territorial and political economy of racial difference in urban space (see Chapter 3), an absence which becomes increasingly stark as the reinvigoration of theories of racial capitalism continues to captivate the social sciences and humanities (see, e.g., Chakravartty, 2012; Kelly, 2022; Leong, 2012; Markley et al., 2020; Pulido, 2017, 2016).

In response, this work seeks to dislocate and unground the foundational logics that drive secession, from the local scale to the national. While I take as my empirical object the new secession in Atlanta, many of the foundational discourses and practices discussed herein similarly undergird larger-scale secessionary politics. My aim is to demonstrate that,

rather than essential categories and necessary relations, secession always rests on shaky ground.

To that end, the next section provides a brief genealogy of the new secession in Atlanta, beginning with the inaugurating movement for Sandy Springs. The third section then tackles the post-foundational approach which guides my analysis of the new secession, laying out a practice of ungrounding predicated on the path breaking, post-foundational geographic work of Friedericke Landau and colleagues (Landau et al., 2021; Landau & Pohl, 2023). In the fourth section, I apply this perspective to three particular grounding practices of the new secession, working through each in detail in order to demonstrate their contingency, their value to the internal logic of secession. Specifically, I ask how the cult of the taxpayer, the fetishization of scale, and the linked issues of feasibility and democracy together structure the terms of engagement of the new secession, foreclosing a more radical, a more just negotiation of territory, resources, and community. Finally, a conclusion returns to the broader questions of power and difference which structure the exercise of boundary change under racial capitalism.

On the New Secession

Following Connor (2015), I understand this new secession as the practice of predominately white suburban communities (though rare exceptions do exist—see Allums et al., 2021; Godinez-Puig & Cornelissen, 2023) carving themselves off from broader and more diverse political configurations (e.g., counties, larger cities) in order to consolidate both political control and accrued material advantage (see also Keil, 2001; Kruse, 2006). This form of secession is accomplished in Georgia through municipal incorporation, the creation of new

cities by legislatively-sanctioned local ballot initiatives. The most infamous example—and the eventual model for future secessions in Atlanta—is Sandy Springs.

Opponents to Atlanta's 1960s attempted annexation of Sandy Springs framed their opposition, at least partially, in overtly racist terms, expressing a deep fear of being subject to Black political control and subsequent desegregation (Bayor, 1996, pp. 87–88). Rosen (2017) quotes two spokesmen for Sandy Springs promising to "'build up a city separate from Atlanta and your Negroes and forbid any Negroes to buy, or own, or live within our limits.'" Once the threat of imminent annexation faded (following the failure of the 1966 vote and the subsequent plans and efforts to consolidate unincorporated areas of Fulton County), the "Committee for Sandy Springs" was established in 1974; it initially advocated local autonomy as a means to control racial integration and limit the construction of apartments that would likely house people of color (Lanari, 2017).

Later, as Lanari (2017, 2019) notes, the committee replaced its anti-civil rights platform with a platform that extolled the virtues of privatized local government. The public arguments for incorporation changed meaningfully in that mentions of race were dropped completely, but the results of incorporation would be the same: affluent whites would be granted the ability to enact exclusionary policies over territories of possessive investment (see Lipsitz, 2006). We can view this transition in racial discourse as the result of an increasing hegemony of colorblind racism in the latter part of the twentieth century (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Despite such discursive shifts, secessionist efforts were stymied until the early twenty-first century by a mix of political opposition and procedural rules in the state legislature. Nevertheless, when Republicans gained the governorship and both houses of the Georgia Assembly in 2004—the first time such a trifecta had been

accomplished in recent memory—one of the first acts of the new government was to ease such restrictions, paving the way for the long-awaited City of Sandy Springs, Georgia's first new city in half a century.

While the surface-level justifications for contemporary cityhood projects range from devolved community governance to brand-driven economic development to nebulous anxieties around crime (Allums, Markley, & Hafley, 2021; Burns, 1994; Connor, 2015; Lanari, 2019) the result of these various secessions has been a rearticulation of both political and economic power at multiple scales, as predominantly white communities condense and segregate the material privileges of whiteness within a larger, more diverse urban constellation. Over the last decade and a half, this movement has transformed the suburban landscape by condensing and bounding the accrued historical advantages of whiteness (Lipsitz, 2006), producing expulsions, annexations, and abdications (Connor, 2015; Lanari, 2019).

Secession enters the urban studies literature most forcefully through the work of the historian Michan Connor (2015; 2014), who deploys the concept as a means of analyzing the colorblind racial politics of secession in both Atlanta and Los Angeles.[8] Conor is particularly concerned with the mechanisms by which new cities that self-evidently create and reinforce difference (both racial and economic) are rendered as distinct from and unrelated to historical processes of overt white supremacy that—in some cases—produced the conditions for the cityhood movements that would follow. He demonstrates the clear functioning of colorblind racism and pernicious presentism in depoliticizing not only the socially-produced landscapes upon which these new cityhood movements seek to

[8] An earlier article from Henderson (2006) deploys secession to characterize automobility in the Atlanta metro.

act, but also the very explicitly racially-inflected roots of (at least some of) the movements themselves. But Connor's most important contribution is to solidify the theoretical salience of secession for understanding the racial geographies of municipal incorporation. More recent work on the narrower topic of secession in Atlanta (e.g. Allums, 2020; Allums & Markley, 2020; Allums, Markley, & Hafley, 2021; Lanari, 2017; 2019) builds on Connor's initial intervention, arguing that boosters and opponents approach secession in fundamentally ahistorical and colorblind terms, that their rhetoric is a product largely of the hegemonic imagineering (Rutheiser, 1996) machine that has dominated politics and representation in Atlanta for decades.

It is worth noting that Kevin Kruse sketches out a logic of secession to which this narrower conceptualization no doubt owes some recognition—indeed, Connor comments on this intimacy in his own deployment. Describing the now-defunct movement for a Milton County which would have captured several wealthy northern suburbs, Connor (2015, p. 437) argues that it

> is not simply an attempt at separation by the wealthy; it builds on and extends the spatial politics of race in the region. Kruse (2005) has used the metaphor of secession to describe the flight of 160,000 white residents from the Atlanta city limits between 1960 and 1980, but the term much more aptly describes the contemporary movement to form Milton County.

Kruse (2005) repeatedly positions secessionism as a mindset, a possessive manner of perceiving and interacting with the increasingly non-white world. And while this is not untrue, the diagnosis remains incomplete.

As with the original Confederate secession—the symbolic antecedent from which the concept treated herein necessarily gains its affective and diagnostic force—contemporary secession is not a metaphor but a political, legal, and material phenomenon involving the production of novel boundaries and territories, the accumulation of white capital, and the exclusion of non-white communities. As Highsmith (2020, para. 5) contends, in the US, "local communities bear the responsibility for funding local services…[r]edistribution stops at the city limit, allowing municipal boundaries to function effectively as tax shelters for white residents of segregated neighborhoods." Thus, secession is not simply a mindset but a material practice of boundary work which reproduces possessive geographies of whiteness. Nevertheless, we should not dismiss Kruse on the theorization of secession; rather, if we simply replace his usage of secession with boundary work, the slippage that Connor identifies is resolved even as the more precise deployment of secession is retained.

Outside of Conor's and Kruse's interventions, Roger Keil (2001; 2000) and other geographers prefigure the brief conceptual turn to secession in their critiques of global and neoliberal suburbanisms (Boudreau & Keil, 2001; Purcell, 1997). Keil (2000), for instance, contends that in the case of urban secession, "what appear to be limited struggles over local jurisdiction and administration of service delivery, are struggles over the urban dimensions of a globalized world" (p. 759). That is, urban secession not only represents a political project in its own right, but a political project that is both opaque and entangled in other structural histories and processes. Boudreau & Keil (2001) link urban secession with neo-conservative politics, characterizing it as a 'social project of the right,' and suggesting that "the 'political opportunity structures' provided by globalisation and the prevalent neo-

conservatism, might explain how secession movements in Los Angeles were able to mobilise large efforts to their cause" (p. 1701). Nevertheless, despite this flurry of interest in the late 90s and early 00s, very little work on secession as a concept or phenomenon has emerged in the last decade, a puzzling absence given the evident geographic salience of such projects.[9]

Post-foundational Inquiry & Race

In responding to the absence above, the work at hand does not seek—as is the case with much contemporary, qualitative social scientific research—to produce a phenomenological account of its object. To be more precise, I am not concerned herein with representing subjective experiences or analyzing perceptions of relevant actors per se, nor with the deployment of a single framework of interpretation by which to assess such accounts. As Lather (1991) argues, the

> phenomenological paradigm is inadequate insofar as it is based upon an assumption of fully rational action. Sole reliance on the participants' perceptions of their situation is misguided because…ideological mystification may be present. A central challenge posed to the interpretive paradigm is the argument that reality is more than negotiated accounts—that we are both shaped by and shapers of our world. (p. 64)

Similarly, Adorno, in his critique of phenomenology, suggests that "the return to things requires that we reflect on our interaction with things under specific historical conditions" (Cook, 2018, p. 12; see also Adorno, 2013). Indeed, phenomenological work

[9] A rare and recent exception is Wyndham-Douds (2023).

> is true as long as it accounts for the impossibility of its own beginnings and lets itself be driven at every stage by its inadequacy to the things themselves. It is, however, untrue in the pretension that success is at hand and that states-of-affairs would very simply correspond to its constructions and aporetic concepts. In other words, it is untrue according to the measure of scientificity which is its own. (Adorno, 2013, p.25)

Phenomenology must, in its concern and care for the first-order experience of social life—Husserl's (1901/2001) things themselves—participate in the reification of the conditions by which such experience is possibilized. My project instead aims at demystification—not as from behind a veil, where careful phenomenological accounts might pierce the totalizing hegemony of brute data or scientistic accounts, but as against a railing suddenly disappeared, where that which we trusted would keep us from the edge is deprived of any solidity at all. A phenomenology of secession might give us rich insight into the experiences, affects, and actions of the various actors arrayed around the making of new cities, their deliberative practice, their subjective valuations; this project, instead, seeks below, within, and against the phenomenon.

In the broadest sense, then, I enact a postfoundational approach, which is to say that I am concerned with troubling the constitutive foundational discourses, material practices, and geographies of secession, those elements which undergird the 'complex confluence' above. Harris & Allums (forthcoming) argue that "post-foundational critique is not an attempt to locate an original or more authentic foundation…instead, it is an attempt to locate the ways in which the forms and categories of reality were never foundational,

originary, or natural to begin with, but are reproduced as such through practices of knowledge, power, and discourse" (see also Foucault, 2002; Butler, 2007).

I wish to be explicit: this post-foundational approach is not (only) an instantiation of what Mouffe (1993) and others (see Laclaue & Mouffe, 2014; Marttila, 2016; Sundell, 2021) call Post-foundational Discourse Analysis. Discourse is, indeed, central to the project in particular moments, but it does not exhaust the totality of the objects and processes that concern me herein. Rather, I also follow Cornel West (1987), who, in his meditations on method in the social theory of race, urges thinkers towards an approach which

> derives neither from mere deconstructions of the duplicitous and deceptive character of rhetorical strategies of logocentric discourses, nor from simple investigations into the operations of power of such discourses. Unlike Derrida and de Man, genealogical materialism [West's proposed method] does not rest content with a horizon of language. In contrast to Foucault and Said, I take the challenge of historical materialism with great seriousness.

West's readings of Derrida and Foucault are perhaps ungenerous here; nevertheless, his insistence that we explicitly deploy postfoundational approaches beyond the discursive is essential. Such an approach "preserves the materiality of multi-faceted structured social practices" while allowing for their interplay with a broader and deeper universe of "discursive operations and extra-discursive formations."

The valences of property, for instance, are more than discursive, as private property regimes produce the material ground for the new secession and territorial borders mark and defend its various successes. Discourse does not constitute this material ground, rather it is

social relations. This is not to reassert some vulgar determinism against a caricatured post-Marxist idealism; it is, rather, to draw attention to the extent to which the sort of de-centered totality of which Gibson-Graham (2006) and others (see Cullehberg, 1999; Jay, 1984) write is no less a totality for being decentered. Discourse does not exhaust us here, as the contingent foundations of our worlds are not merely semantic, but neither must "the privileged material mode of production" necessarily be "located in the economic sphere" (West, 1987).

Post-foundational geography, then, as Harris & Allums (forthcoming) argue, seeks after these contingent foundations, offering us "a way to question those terms that function as the unquestioned and unquestionable foundations or grounds from which subjects are authorized, ideas are built, actions are justified, and politics are licensed." They go on: "our seemingly foundational truths are necessarily partial and fragmented for they are historically and geographically constituted, they are a product of our time and place; thus, they are political and always a site of questioning." Post-foundational critique, as Landau et al. (2021) contend, puts us face to face with "sedimentations of power and place," which are crystallized around what they name *grounding practices.* The work of the post-foundational diagnostician, then, is to *[un]ground*, to seek out those attempts to ground particular orders, particular sedimentations, particular relations, to contest the received and presumed-essential ontologies of a given regime. It is to this project I now turn.

[Un]grounding the New Secession

Each of the following subsections pursues a distinct grounding practice (Landau et al. 2021) by which the logics of secession are reproduced. Each seeks to [un]ground an

"unquestioned and unquestionable foundation" (Harris & Allums, forthcoming) which licenses the politics of secession as such. In simpler terms, I am seeking out the taken-for-granted assumptions, relations, territories, and discourses which undergird secession in the hope that by making these explicit, by revealing their contingent and contestable nature, we might more effectively resist the reproduction of possessive geographies of whiteness through municipal incorporation and other technologies of secession.

I. On the political economy of the taxpayer

A central preoccupation of white secession movements in Atlanta is taxation. No sophisticated analysis is required to arrive at this conclusion, so fundamental is it to the secessionary impulse. A representative of BCC characterized the issue thusly:

> citizens of Buckhead are happy to pay a large amount of property taxes, as long as they're receiving a return on that investment. That's what's lacking right now. So, it's not that people are trying to avoid or not pay property taxes. But if you're paying significantly more than your share, then I think the research that another party had done this about two years ago, but they have found that it takes him in $7.20 to get $1 benefit if you live in Buckhead on your taxes, which is not a great return.

There are several fundamental issues with this story which must be headed off before I turn to further analysis.

First, taxes are not a return-generating investment—they are not intended as such and, further, are incapable of delivering return in any conventional sense of the word. Even at the sub-national level, where governments cannot simply spend sovereign money into existence through public programs prior to the collection of any tax revenue, such an abstracted understanding distorts the true political economy of taxation. Taxes are not paid

because a rational investor, after weighing various options and instruments, decides that the property tax is the most lucrative option. No! Taxes are paid to avoid the legal ramifications of not paying taxes. The animating instrument for tax compliance is not the carrot but the stick. The second issue—related closely to the first—is the question of 'share' in tax burden (see Fischedl, 2002; Highsmith, 2020). Under a progressive taxation system—which is the implicit model for property taxes on homes—the amounts paid by disparate taxpayers are vastly divergent. 'Significantly more'—as the representative above characterizes the matter—is Buckhead's share in any reasonable system of progressive taxation, the corollary to home prices and incomes significantly higher than the remainder of the city.

The paying of taxes and the receiving of services are not linked in any immediate way. Paying one dollar in taxes does not entitle a person to one dollar of services, nor, frankly, to any services at all; indeed the decision to levy taxes and the decision to spend what is always-already public money have absolutely no implicit relation to one another (Baker & Murphy, 2020; Kelton, 2020). Priorities for public spending are determined by one set of criteria, millage rates and other indices of taxation by another. That tax dollars in some abstract way 'fund' public spending at the sub-national level does not in itself deputize certain citizens or localities to make a direct claim on those dollars.[10] Power over public dollars is exercised at the ballot box; the problem for Buckhead City is that as things stand (for now), everyone still (theoretically) gets a vote.

Nevertheless, Buckhead is not unique in its appeal to tax equity as a contingent foundation for urban politics (see Fischedl, 2002; Highsmith, 2020). We owe the

[10] Yet, as Highsmith (2020) argues, this is precisely the common sense of such things.

persistence of this distorted, common sense concept of taxation to what Wendy Brown (2015, p. 62) calls political rationality, which, as regards [neo]liberalism, "does not merely marketize in the sense of monetizing all social conduct and social relations, but, more radically, casts them in an exclusively economic frame, one that has both epistemological and ontological dimensions." Indeed,

> when there is only *homo oeconomicus* in every sphere and the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the figuration of human beings as human capitals eliminates the basis of a democratic citizenry, namely a demos concerned with and asserting its political sovereignty. (p. 65)

Thus, under such a rationality, the paying of tax is given primacy as *the* political act which legislates and circumscribes the sovereign-as-taxpayer. We might, following Walsh (2018, 2017) call this rationality *taxpayer citizenship.*

Of course, the taxpayer—and his concomitant, conservative austerity—is not a new figure in American history (see Highsmith, 2020; Walsh, 2018, 2017). Williamson (2021), for instance, argues that when "the former Confederate elite mobilized to successfully overthrow the multiracial Reconstruction-era governments in the South 150 years ago, it was under the banner of fiscal conservatism." When the planter class began its pursuit of southern Redemption, they

> focused their critique of Reconstruction on rising government debt and excessive spending, painting government by black people and poor whites as intrinsically corrupt. Adopting a new identity as concerned taxpayers helped the rich bridge the divide with small white farmers, for whom new land taxes were heavy, while avoiding explicit opposition to black male suffrage, which might smack of treason

> to Northerners…While the opponents of Reconstruction were painting themselves as staid and respectable fiscal conservatives, they were simultaneously engaged in a radical plan to subvert democratic elections across the South.

The reactionary racial politics of the white elite were rapidly subsumed under the cult of the taxpayer—a term I borrow from Williamson—the only ostensible concern of which was the cold-blooded problem of sound governance. The greatest evil for the southern elites was now, as one South Carolina taxpayer asserted, that "'[t]hey who lay the taxes do not pay them, and that they who are to pay them have no voice in the laying of them'" (Williamson, 2021). One can locate almost identical statements from Buckhead secession leaders. BCC, for instance, asserts that "Buckhead gets very little return on investment for the amount of taxes that we pay to the City of Atlanta" (BCC, 2022). There are more direct connections between this sort of taxpayer citizenship (Walsh, 2018, 2017) and the original southern Redeemers. Indeed, Highsmith (2020) identifies an illustrative instance whereby contemporary "limits on property taxes in Missouri," which were initially adopted in the Redeemer period, "restrict the ability of local communities to fund services through redistributive taxation" (para. 9).

Concerns over taxation took on an increasingly antidemocratic tone as the 19th century wore on in the south. Williamson (2021) argues that the line between the two was "vanishingly thin":

> In the Vicksburg Massacre in Mississippi in 1874, the local taxpayer league marched to the courthouse on Tax Day and demanded that all black officeholders resign, including the sheriff responsible for collecting taxes. After a standoff that lasted over a week, they opened fire on the black militia, killing between 75 and

> 300 people…And still, the respectability of the 'taxpayer' provided protection; in a hearing investigating the massacre, one member of the local taxpayer league insisted that 'there was nothing political in it; colored men, if tax payers, could join.'

It goes without saying, of course that, having just been relieved as a class of their status as property, former slaves faced more challenges to political power and social standing than the account above suggests. Yet the narrow possibility of inclusion—the reflexive could—provides ample cover in the sublimation of white supremacy.

Fiscal austerity offered anti-Reconstruction Redeemers a gentile cover for their revanchist racial project, one to which Northern monied interests would likely be more receptive and poorer, southern whites less averse. By this sleight of hand was the death of reconstruction achieved (Du Bois, 1935/1998). But the broader relation between secession democracy and fiscal conservatism—of which this cult of the taxpayer is but one small order—was not merely symptomatic of the Reconstruction period. Du Bois further links such fiscal conservatism to white supremacy, arguing that the former was a shibboleth, a watchword for the latter leading up to and throughout the Civil War itself.

What the cult of the taxpayer asserts is that anything less than full control by wealthy, white communities of public resources is not only a grievous violence against the right of those communities to steer the ship, but also necessarily leads to corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiency (Highsmith, 2020; Walsh, 2018, 2017). The fair share is nothing less than everything. The taxpayer reveals himself in the Reconstruction era as the sympathetic figure by which secession democracy is realized; overdetermined as his

emergence may be, it is not coincidental. Neither is his persistence as an avatar of secession democracy.[11]

The cult of the taxpayer also continues to exert force at the national scale. Nowhere is this force more evident than in the thoroughgoing concern with the federal deficit. In the months across which I wrote this dissertation, I witnessed the regular implosion of social programs, the collapse of emergent nodes of social democracy on an almost weekly basis. In some cases—direct stimulus checks, pandemic response funding—the Biden administration declined to continue popular and effective Trump era programs. In others—most notably the Build Back Better legislation, which was to be Biden's signature achievement—the administration was thwarted by its own party's unwillingness to coalesce around public expenditure for public good.

Even in defending the long-buried plan against retroactive criticism from Jeff Bezos, the administration cannot help but to crow its fiduciary righteousness. A White House spokesperson contends:

> It doesn't require a huge leap to figure out why one of the wealthiest individuals on Earth opposes an economic agenda for the middle class that cuts some of the biggest costs families face, fights inflation for the long haul, and adds to the historic deficit reduction the President is achieving by *asking the richest taxpayers and corporations to pay their fair share*. (Zeballos-Roig & Kaplan, 2022, emphasis mine)

There is a detailed economic argument against this sort of reflexive austerity in Modern Monetary Theory (see, e.g., Kelton, 2020), which fundamentally repositions the role of

[11] Here, Joseph (2021) might be of some interest.

public expenditure and collapses the implicit morality of deficit talk. The work at hand cannot accommodate a lengthy discussion on the matter, nor am I prepared to elucidate its finer points. My only aim here is to illustrate the pervasiveness of the rites of this conspicuous cult in even the most progressive political agendas.

Thus, when Williamson suggests that "the rhetoric of the taxpayer will likely continue to provide antidemocratic reactionaries with allies in much the way it did at the end of Reconstruction," she prefigures, in different words, the continuity of secession democracy with which we are concerned wherein. While it is of course true that not all contemporary fiscal conservatives use taxation as a smokescreen for less tasteful politics, it is nevertheless true that in all cases, the preconstituted "rhetoric of the taxpayer is readymade to call into question the right of black and poor Americans to participate in or benefit from their government" (Williamson, 2021). The new secession, echoing prior moments in the history of American reaction, simply codifies and bounds such exclusions, assuring the stability of property in whiteness, whiteness as property.

Returning to the particulars of the Buckhead case, we can illustrate how the cult of the taxpayer so reasonably assaults the foundations of democratic control. BCC contends—despite its repeated and intensifying aspersions—that the Buckhead City movement is actually deeply concerned with the welfare of the majority-Black remainder, that its secession will, in fact, benefit the City of Atlanta as well. White walks us through his dream:

> First of all, how can [Buckhead City] help Atlanta? I already have some wonderful things. We're talking about how we can help the inner city at risk youth in Atlanta, not given a blank cheque to City Hall to waste. But putting it right into families,

> churches and local organizations that can help because we're blessed. We have to share that blessing with with other communities, and there's some great things we can do to invest Buckhead City money in places around Georgia. (White, 2021)

On the surface, of course, this reads like standard conservative libertarian fare: the voluntarism of charitable giving over the compulsion of taxation. But the notion of blessing here works in duplicate. Of course Buckhead is blessed with wealth and property—to the extent, at least, that we understand the material deposition of racial capitalist abstractions to be measured in units of blessings. It is also, though—we are meant to understand—blessed in allocative wisdom, sealed to the straight and narrow. In the cult of the taxpayer, what is the former if not incontrovertible proof of the latter? If Sandy Springs attempted government by contract, Buckhead City would innovate government by investment, the power of venture capital accountable only to the angels themselves.

II. On Feasibility

Prior to 2004, creating new cities in Georgia was heavily restricted by both state law and legislative procedure. New cities were, for instance, prevented from incorporating within a certain geographic radius of existing municipalities and the state approval process, which certifies the feasibility study and sanctions the referendum vote, was more rigorous. Largely due to such restrictions, prior to Sandy Springs no new city had been formed in Georgia for half a century. When, however, Republicans took control of the governorship and both houses of the General Assembly in the early 2000s, one of their first legislative actions was to roll back these restrictions; the process for forming a new city is now quite straightforward.

Any person or group of people can petition to create a new city via secession, so long as they can secure sponsorship in the legislature. In order to incorporate, proposed cities must then execute a feasibility study, by which the state, via some unit of its public universities, certifies the narrow viability of the city to fund its own existence. If this study is then approved by the legislature, the new city is put to a public vote via referendum. Crucially, in both the feasibility study and the referendum, only the proposed city, the bounds of which are simply conjured out of thin air by the petitioning entity, is considered. Thus, potential adverse effects and broader public sentiment are scrubbed from consideration by the laundering of cityhood proposals through an approval process. Feasibility study and referendum give a gloss of democratic participation and technocratic deliberation, reducing the active reproduction of possessive geographies of whiteness to a dispassionate question of local governance. In this brief interlude, I wish to problematize these two foundational moments—i.e., the referendum and the feasibility study—that together constitute and license the act of secession as a democratic exercise.

Let us begin with the question of feasibility. In the case of Buckhead City, both Georgia State University (GSU) and the University of Georgia (UGA)—the typical, historical arbiters of cityhood feasibility as well as two of the state's flagship schools—declined to assess feasibility. Bill White (2021) alleges this was politically motivated, though seems unable to defend his assertion that "the City of Atlanta…did block us from going to the traditional list." The Buckhead City Committee was thus compelled to travel to Valdosta State University, in the southern end of Georgia, to secure a cityhood feasibility study, the first the VSU Center for South Georgia Regional Impact (CSGRI) has ever produced. This, already, was a major break with tradition, as the Carl Vinson Institute of

Government—a highly respected, public-facing unit of UGA dedicated to local government and policy in the state—has overseen the vast majority of such studies over the past two decades. Testifying before the legislature, one of the authors of the Valdosta State report responded to questions about the irregularity of their involvement, contending that the center has

> a lot of experience in feasibility studies from other sources. This is the first one we've done for a city. The center was created in 2018. And this is the first opportunity we've had and hopefully we'll have others. (CSGRI, 2022)

Indeed, the use of Valdosta State, a rural regional university, in certifying feasibility would not have been possible only a few years ago. Curiously, as Brentin Mock (2021a, para. 27) reports, Georgia "lawmakers recently changed the rule, and now any qualified University System of Georgia school can perform the study." Nevertheless, White insists that BCC was "so pleased to work with the great people" of Valdosta State, who "did a great job."

While the context for the Buckhead feasibility study is irregular, my concern with the feasibility study as a foundational object of secession transcends any individual case. As a matter of Georgia law, the legislature asserts its right to "prescribe certain minimum standards which must exist as a condition precedent to the original incorporation of a municipal corporation of this state" (OCGA § 36-31-1). Beyond laying out minimum density requirements, the statute declines to codify such minimum standards, nor does it lay out a statutory process for carrying out municipal incorporation in a standard manner. Thus, despite their centrality to secession, neither the feasibility study nor the referendum is actually required by law; the standard cityhood process is, rather, a matter of legislative procedure without formal codification. This relative informality, of course, raises

additional questions of transparency and equal treatment. For the purposes of this project, though, we will leave these specific questions unperturbed.

Putting to the side whether it should be a matter of law or custom, the feasibility study nevertheless predominates in the common practice of secession in Georgia. Specifically, a feasibility study is required, de rigueur, in order for any act of incorporation to proceed to a referendum. The feasibility study is intended to demonstrate to the legislature and the public that a new city is, simply, feasible. As a representative for CSGRI testified to the state legislature, the Buckhead "feasibility study is limited to fiscal feasibility. The purpose is to determine if the city can support itself. All other factors are outside of our scope of work." The BCC (2022) asserts similarly that "The feasibility study was never intended to answer all questions about Buckhead City, nor does it present a de facto city 'budget.' The authors only set out to determine if the city was possible."

Despite its centrality to the secession process, the feasibility study does not 'prove,' in any conventional sense of the word, that a new city will function as desired. It does not constrain the actions of the city once (if) incorporated, does not account for potential external changes which—in a highly networked urban context—might mediate assumptions and expectations of feasibility. What is feasible today might not be tomorrow. The vanguard of secession cannot guarantee the actions—nor indeed the character—of a future government. The feasibility study merely establishes the ostensibly technical grounds upon which a still-political decision in the legislature will be rendered and further political acts given legitimacy. The execution of the feasibility study does nothing more than produce an object which then structures debate, fixing the ontology of secession firmly in the quantifiable and the administrable. The effective purpose of the feasibility study,

then, is not to demonstrate feasibility as a positive condition but to lash the terms of political debate to only a narrow and banal consideration of income and outlay, neatly packaged within boundaries forged of air.

Assuming the legislature is satisfied by the findings of the feasibility study and wishes to advance the act of incorporation, the proposed city's referendum is the only remaining hurdle to secession. In the case of Buckhead City, the referendum has not yet been approved. We can, nevertheless, use prior cases to analyze the procedure.

In each referendum to date, only those residents who fall within the approved bounds of the proposed city are given an opportunity to vote on its incorporation; all other stakeholders are effectively disenfranchised with respect to the question of their own futures (see Godinez-Puig & Cornelissen, 2023). In essence, such a precedent allows cityhood activists to choose their own voters, a practice which in any other context would be quickly criticized as blatant gerrymandering. As Ed Lindsey, one of the leaders of the opposition to Buckhead City asserts, BCC "likes to use the word 'divorce,' but in a divorce both parties get a say-so on how things look" (Mock, 2021a, para. 26). Bill White insists that the BCC is simply seeking "the right to vote for every registered voter…that is a divine, sacred right." Sacred as it may be to some, this sacrament is doled out sparingly by a priesthood dedicated above all else to the rites of secession democracy.

The genesis of the surficial contradiction between democracy and secessionism is, that the aesthetics of democracy are not identical to democracy *per se*, that many ostensible markers of democracy are instead accidents (Virilio, 2008, 2007) of liberalism. When secession activists appeal to the "sacred" right to vote, for instance, what they actually signal is a preference for toothless liberal norms—ones which, despite their appearance as

universal, are continuously violated in the State of Georgia through racist voter ID laws and related practices. When secessionists call for public debate in an attempt to prove their case on the merits, they invoke only the liberal tradition of government by discussion, which is not itself democracy. When they position the new secession in the broad tradition of American self-determination (as e.g., in Gebbia, 2022), they demonstrate only and exactly the tricky entanglements and inheritances of actually-existing democracy.

There is a further question at stake. This is not, as one might imagine, what the demonstrable will of the people may be with respect to municipal incorporation. It is, rather, how such a will is produced, demonstrated, and deployed. In other words, we are not concerned with measuring empirically the preconstituted will of the broader *demos*, but in establishing the conditions by which such a will is constructed politically towards particular ends. In the case of secession, the limitation of the franchise to only those who dwell within the socially-constructed borders of the proposed city gives the lie to the democratic *bona fides* of the secessionist project. When combined with the constrained investigations of the feasibility study, the result is that actual politics are disappeared under the weight of procedure.

But we cannot necessarily assume that the results of these claims are not democratic, because democracy itself is internally heterogeneous and not always benign. We will approach the contradictions inherent in this particular idea from multiple vantages in the following section. What we can say for now is that such appeals (as above) to the inviolable rights of democracy—which are, as I have shown, actually and only appeals to the aesthetics of process—need not be given any sort of credence as legitimate arguments for the validity of Buckhead City as a political project. The new secession is not necessarily

democratic even as its practitioners are singularly committed to the performance of particular simulacral shibboleths which are taken daily for democracy *per se*.

III. On the Fetishization of the Local

Secession of any kind, of course and by necessity, produces fragments. To secede is to remove (oneself, one's property) from a larger configuration—indeed it is only in this specific sociospatial relationality that the concept of secession has any sort of coherence. One cannot secede from something to which one does not already, in some constituent capacity, belong, and one cannot combine into some other configuration without first seceding. Thus, the Confederacy, while it lasted, claimed only some small fraction of the broader United States, even as it assembled together individual state units into a larger whole. Sandy Springs too occupies but a small portion of Fulton County, Stonecrest just a corner of DeKalb. Perhaps such a truism does not bear explicating—indeed, I would not linger here except that the issue of scale *per se*, which is to say not in some ancillary or accidental sense, is fundamental to contemporary foundations of secession.

Figure 3.1 Mailer from failed LaVista Hills secession campaign, linking scale and value

For supporters of cityhood, scale becomes a fetish, a way of projecting a whole set of more or less legitimate political demands and desires onto a technical question of size, abstracting these issues from the social relations which produce and mediate them. Indeed, if a single, coherent 'discourse' of secession can be said to exist, it is the fetishization of the local around which it articulates. Specifically, the local is constructed as being necessarily more responsive, accountable, transparent, and efficient than the more-than-local; this is true across all cases, viz:

> More Accountability, Each Council Member Represents about 11,000 People. (Pro-LaVista Hills Mailer, 2017)

> DeKalb economic development department, it covers 700,000 individuals as a department with one director and four people, to cover everything. What if I had an economic development department with a director and three people just covering 50,000 and 30 square miles, instead of 200 square miles? (LaVista Hills Supporter, 2017)

> First, the formation of Buckhead City would leave the City of Atlanta with responsibility for 20% fewer residents and a smaller Atlanta…a smaller anything…is easier to manage. (BCC, 2022)

> I don't know whether they can adapt but I think the problem with the county, due to their size generally, and we have some of the smaller counties in the nation, right,

> counties have no incentive to concentrate development. (LaVista Hills Supporter, 2017)

The theory of scale implicit in such claims is, of course, absolute nonsense. There is nothing inherent, nothing essential to scale to provide for such assertions—indeed, as decades of geographic research has demonstrated there is nothing inherent in scale at all (Massey, 2005; Purcell, 2006).

The reality, as the 2019 Sandy Springs reversion to conventional public administration effectively illustrates, is that all forms of governance—conventional or privatized, local or national, white or Black—are susceptible to corruption, inefficiency, and other weaknesses. Indeed, a cynical reading of politics and politicians might insist that such ills are unavoidable, more signal than noise. The question, then, becomes: how are such universal symptoms deployed in service of particular political aims? In the vast majority of new secession movements so far, the answer is: as a polite justification for escaping Black governance. In most places in Atlanta—due to legacies of segregation, white flight, and defensive localism—concentrated, affluent whiteness only exists at the local scale. A retreat to the local in Atlanta is thus, in effect if not intent, an escape from non-white governance.

A further weakness of this understanding of scale is, at the limit, it suggests that any given instance of geographic fracture will always yield the optimal state, that the appropriate number of scalar relocalizations at a given state n is always n+1. Thus BCC (2022, emphasis mine) can posit, without any sort of dissonance, that "Buckhead City will be better equipped to fix our roads, update our transportation systems, and maintain our parks because *our tax dollars will be going directly to our own community*." The neatly

repressed question: what happens when, in some decades, one or another portion of Buckhead seeks better a better return on their dollar or greater responsiveness in their government? With respect to the subdividing of urban governance, it is, as they say, turtles all the way down.

The single exception to this will to localization is the rare case wherein the procedural techniques of secession might actually be wielded against the structures of secession democracy, where the localizing might instead condense counter-hegemonic possibilities. To illustrate such a scenario, we might consider the stalled City of Greenhaven in DeKalb County:

> Greenhaven would be the second biggest city in the state of Georgia. It would have a population of about 295,000 people. It is a large area. It encompasses most of South DeKalb, except for the cities and [at the time] proposed Stonecrest. And so there are a lot – because of its size, and because it incorporates a lot of people, and because of the potential power that it has, there are different agendas that it interacts with that people are concerned about… (Stonecrest Supporter, 2017)

Greenhaven would incorporate a vast area of largely Black middle- and working-class county territory. The fetishization of the local, it must then be specified, rests upon a single—but inviolable—condition. It must never increase or concentrate Black political power or other forces to such a degree that broader white hegemony is threatened. Once again, any exercise of potentially counter-hegemonic, democratic self-determination—no matter how nominal—exists at the pleasure of secession democracy.

But, as the case of Greenhaven reminds us, one further issue lurks in the shadow of scale. The different agendas referenced in the selection above are complex and

overdetermined at multiple scales, but certainly include state-level strategic considerations around the racial and partisan balance of power; indeed Greenhaven was recently denied a referendum by the state legislature, even as cities like Tucker and LaVista Hills were allowed the vote. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore that the new secession in general—and the Buckhead movement in particular—functions as a sort of proxy for broader state politics. State-level (and, particularly, rural) political support for balkanization in Atlanta is not new—I recount above, for instance, the path to cityhood in Sandy Springs and its imbrication with the rightward shift in state politics in the late 90s and early 00s.

The Buckhead City movement represents a point of departure, however, in that the BCC has been able to rally vocal support from state politicians—even as it has failed to secure sponsorship from any legislator who actually represents the Buckhead community. A May 16, 2022 email to BCC supporters included a voting guide, which dedicated significant space to endorsing a candidate for Lt. Governor of Georgia.

> We are fully backing BURT JONES to be our next Lt. Governor. Burt has been with us from DAY ONE, and he is publicly pledging during his LTGOV race to get the BHC bills to a vote on the GA Senate floor in the first days of this next upcoming session.

Burt Jones, it should be noted, is a resident of Jackson, Georgia, some 60 miles south of Buckhead in Middle Georgia.[12] Yet the Buckhead bill has become part of his statewide platform, alongside such crucial interventions as investigating thoroughly debunked instances of voter fraud in the 2020 election, banning critical race theory in schools, and—

[12] Jones has also recently been subpoenaed by the Fulton County District Attorney over his alleged involvement with Donald Trump's attempt at overturning election results in Georgia.

inexplicably—securing the "Southern Border by pushing for completion of the wall to prevent the flow of illegal immigration" (Jones, 2022). David Perdue, a former US senator and Donald Trump's handpicked primary opponent to take down Republican incumbent Governor Brian Kemp, has also come out in support of the Buckhead secession. Such support from state-level politicians, while strange at first glance, fits neatly into the broader Republican strategy for the state; turmoil in Atlanta—alongside rampant voter suppression statewide—could return Georgia to Republican hands.

As opposed to this sort of explicit endorsement, prior state-level support for cityhood from Republican politicians was more broadly ideological, i.e. they supported not Sandy Springs as such (though one could certainly make a compelling argument, as I have attempted herein and elsewhere, that this was simply semantic obfuscation) but the neoliberal philosophy of local, privatized government as a tenet of conservative politics. The case of Buckhead City seems to represent the opening of yet another front in the battle over self-determination and the political future of Georgia.

Conclusion

As Connor (2023) argues, the advent of the new secession in Atlanta was largely animated by the simple "reality that White suburbanites didn't want their taxes to support services in poor Black communities." My own work on the subject has generally concurred with this diagnosis, as has a great deal of popular reporting (see, e.g., Mock, 2018) and scholarship (Burns, 1994; Highsmith, 2020; Wyndham-Douds, 2023). Secession is a racial capitalist project predicated on exclusion and accumulation, a territorialization of the white possessive which wants nothing more than its own reproduction.

Nevertheless, the narratives offered by secession activists as to their motives leave no space for such an interpretation, at least on their own terms. The post-foundational work of [un]grounding suggests a way out of this problem, calling its practitioners to focus on the practices that attempt to render a hermetic narrative, to pick them apart with the understanding that they were never essential, never natural, never necessarily-so—and thus, they are, as all historical and geographical sedimentations, contestable.

The urgency of this work, I would hope, is self-evident from the forgoing pages. If it needs a finer point, Connor (2023) provides a meaningful and timely one:

> [Marjorie Taylor] Greene is taking inspiration from the rhetoric and achievements of a movement that enabled privileged White conservatives to keep their resources, build a political community in opposition to outsiders and cloak their self-interested politics in the appealing language of community and local control. That's what she's looking to replicate on a national basis. It's worth taking this vision, and the politics behind it, seriously since 8 in 10 Americans now live in a metro area.

Abhorrent as we may find it, taking such a vision seriously requires careful analysis, requires returning time and again to the particulars of its coherence, its various intellectual and spatial genealogies, its image of the future. It is only with this sort of care that we can begin to press the foundations, the taken-for-granted assumptions, that hold it up. It is precisely this which I have attempted in the foregoing pages.

CHAPTER 5

AUTHORITARIAN URBANISM IN THE NEOLIBERAL WAKE: BUCKHEAD SECESSION AND THE LIMITS OF WHITE FREEDOM[13]

[13] Allums, C.A. To be submitted to *Annals of the American Association of Geographers.*

Abstract

The Buckhead City movement positions its attempted secession as a struggle for freedom. In response, I track the new secession from its roots in neoliberal privatization efforts to more authoritarian forms of urban control, locating the synthesis in the form of Buckhead City. I ask how conceptualizations of freedom grounded in racial capitalist value preclude a universal freedom, and demonstrate that the freedom Buckhead City seeks is, like many other movements to solidify the possessive geographies of whiteness, a freedom to keep others unfree. In response, I build from Fanon to suggest the contours of a universal freedom that refuses the irrationality of whiteness in favor of a universal reason inseparable from a wholly transformed world.

Introduction

In March of this year, after a failed full court press to sway legislators, The Buckhead City Committee (BCC) conceded defeat. Georgia's Republican Governor Brian Kemp, citing the obvious economic risks to the state of a Buckhead secession, threatened to veto any cityhood bill that made it out of the legislature. The most recent instantiation of what I call the new secession in Atlanta,[14] this movement would have de-annexed wealthy, white portions of the City of Atlanta and re-incorporated them together as an independent municipality, separate but equal to the capital city. And while avoiding the catastrophic outcome that may well have resulted from a Buckhead referendum is worth celebration, in many ways tremendous damage has already been done.[15] The most significant, perhaps, is the articulation of the Buckhead City movement to the so-called Cop City, through the specter of urban crime. Both movements have legitimized authoritarian deployments of police power (Neocleous, 2021) in Atlanta, reproducing what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002) refers to as the uneven, violent geographies of power and difference.

In response to such provocations, this work seeks to come to terms with a confluence of interrelated geographic phenomena. On the one hand, it is an account of the authoritarian psychopolitics of the Buckhead City secession movement as above, one which thinks alongside such problems as security, freedom, accumulation, and democracy in a post-neoliberal urban context. On the other, it is a commentary on the much-heralded, though little-demonstrated, failure of neoliberalism as a political project, its obsolescence ostensibly driven by the rise of authoritarian regimes at multiple scales. For Buckhead,

[14] For an overview, see Allums (2017), Connor (2015); Lenari (2019).
[15] And, indeed, there is no guarantee this effort will not be reawakened under a different governor in the near future or pursued via some as-yet untested method of white territoriality, of which there always seem to be more, an inexhaustible font of racial capitalist boundary work.

while a continuation of a secessionary drive now almost decades long, also represents an inflection point in the movement. Where the new secession in Atlanta has largely been an exercise in privatization and austerity under the banner of cost-cutting and sound governance (Allums & Markley, 2020), the Buckhead City movement takes a much more reactionary line on the necessity of secession, one which converges with broader revanchist movements such as Cop City.

In this, as well as in its aesthetics, boosterism, and general chronology, the Buckhead City movement roughly tracks the post-fascist (Markley & Allums, 2020; Traverso, 2019) turn of the Trump-adjacent forces of broader white revanchism at the state and national level—Cop City is but one more instantiation of the same. More directly, its performative emphasis on securing boundaries against racialized interlopers, establishing demarcations of community belonging tied to such boundaries, and the aggressive policing of activities both within and around the territories reproduced by such boundaries link the broader political climate to the particulars of the Buckhead City movement. It is thus a very useful case for testing the increasingly common suggestion within various strands of academia and the popular press that, post-Trump, neoliberalism and the global, neoliberal governing consensus have collapsed (see, for instance, Wallace-Wells, 2023; Watkins & Seidelman, 2019).[16]

Bringing these two threads together, I contend that by studying the course of the new secession from its origins in neoliberal privatization, we can discern a more complex dialectical movement whereby neoliberal and authoritarian modes of urban governance

[16] Nancy Fraser makes a compelling counterargument, suggesting that what has collapsed is, instead, a particularly 'progressive neoliberalism' (Brenner & Fraser, 2017; Fraser, 2017a, 2017b)—this chapter offers a parallel interpretation to Fraser's.

mutually reinforce the foundations of racial capitalism in their shared commitment to property. Indeed, I contend that authoritarian urbanism, or what Scott Markley & I (Allums & Markley, 2020; Markley & Allums, 2020) have called *reactionary localism*, is only realizable as such in the wake of neoliberalization, that the two are synthesized in the pursuit of a particular, racialized notion of propertied freedom. Following Olson (2004) and others (see, e.g., Yancy, 2022), my ultimate aim is to demonstrate the adaptability of whiteness under racial capitalism, to lay bare those foundations which undergird its various manifestations, and to imagine, even if only briefly, how a more egalitarian spatial politics might challenge such circumscribed and exclusive notions of freedom as those espoused by the Buckhead City movement.

To that end, the section that immediately follows this introduction begins rather unexpectedly, perhaps, with a tranche of brief, historical vignettes, a series of images of Buckhead that both introduce the particulars of the Buckhead case which concerns us herein and point to opaque continuities and repressed divergences that structure and disassemble the idea, the possibility of Buckhead as such. The point is to challenge what Koch (2022) calls the authoritarian univocality that movements such as Buckhead City attempt to secure. I then step back to trace the centrality of neoliberalism to the historical emergence of the new secession in Atlanta, heeling its movement and transformation over the last two decades in the lead up to the Buckhead City movement. In the third section, I return to Buckhead in attempt to diagnose various malignancies of authoritarian whiteness and police power and, in so doing, offer a broader commentary on the supposed end of neoliberalism itself. Finally, I conclude by wondering what a true freedom might look like.

Secession as Capital Strike? In and Out of Neoliberal Urbanism

While ideologically twinned to Cop City as above, the Buckhead City movement rides in the larger wake of Sandy Springs. Sandy Springs was the first new city in the state of Georgia in decades at the time of its 2005 incorporation. A day-one priority for the newly-elected Republican governing trifecta of 2004, Sandy Springs was always-already shot through with ideological baggage. Indeed, throughout the City of Atlanta's attempt to annex Sandy Springs in the 1960s, opponents trafficked in explicit racism, expressing quite explicitly their collective fear of subjection to Black political control and subsequent desegregation (Bayor, 1996, pp. 87-88). As Rosen (2017) reminds us, two spokesmen for Sandy Springs vowed "to create a city separate from Atlanta and prevent any Negroes from purchasing or owning property or living within our borders." When the threat of immediate annexation subsided following a failed vote in 1966, secessionists began to organize, agitating for local autonomy through the establishment of the Committee for Sandy Springs in 1974. Its purpose was to limit racial integration as well as control apartment construction, thereby limiting the potential influx of marginalized communities (Lanari, 2017; see also Markley, 2018; Markley & Allums, 2020) which threatened white accumulation.

As Lanari (2017, 2019) has argued, the inauguration of the committee saw the alteration of the discourse of secession, as proponents shifted from an overt anti-civil rights stance to instead advocating for decentralized government control as a good unto itself. The revised platform no longer made any reference to race; nevertheless, secession would still empower white accumulation through exclusion, would solidify and reproduce possessive territories of whiteness (Lipsitz, 2006). Despite these effects, and against

massive resistance from surrounding communities who were effectively disenfranchised in the certifying referendum (Connor, 2015), Sandy Springs successfully incorporated in 2005.

News coverage was quick to follow, extolling the innovative governance and political vision of the city and its innovative governance model. The New York Times in 2012 described interacting with the new city's government as follows:

> Applying for a business license? Speak to a woman with Severn Trent, a multinational company based in Coventry, England. Want to build a new deck on your house? Chat with an employee of the Collaborative, a consulting firm based in Boston. Need a word with people who oversee trash collection? That would be the URS Corporation, based in San Francisco…Even the city's court, which is in session on this May afternoon, next to the revenue division, is handled by a private company, the Jacobs Engineering Group of Pasadena, Calif. The company's staff is in charge of all administrative work, though the judge, Lawrence Young, is essentially a legal temp, paid a flat rate of $100 an hour. (Segal, 2012)

The Sandy Springs contracting model is based upon the City of Lakewood, CA, which incorporated around the same time the original Sandy Springs movement commenced, and subsequently inspired a deluge of copycat incorporations across the state of California. The Lakewood model centers, proponents crow, around "a plan that puts results, performance and outcomes first" without regard for "process or systems" (Segal, 2005, para.11). Indeed, immediately after incorporation in 2005, Sandy Spring's first mayor proudly claimed to have

> harnessed the energy of the private sector to organize the major functions of city government instead of assembling our own bureaucracy. This we have done because we are convinced that the competitive model is what has made America so successful. And we are here to demonstrate that this same competitive model will lead to an efficient and effective local government." (Segal, 2005, para. 2-3)

Since Sandy Springs in 2005, the Atlanta metro has experienced a glut of municipal incorporations, primarily in its northern, white suburbs. New cities with such evocative names as Johns Creek, Peachtree Corners, and Chattahoochee Hills have reterritorialized unincorporated land in Fulton, DeKalb, and Gwinnett Counties as conspicuous, possessive (Bonds, 2020; Lipsitz, 2006, Moreton-Robinson, 2015) enclaves of white control within majority-minority county geographies (see also Burns, 1994).

Later movements (see Figure 1.3 above) largely followed the Sandy Springs playbook of a skeletal contract government assembled around a well-established commercial core—both of which were intended to allow for more efficient accumulation and commerce within the bounds of the city—while what few services the cities provided were limited to largely bourgeois concerns such as code enforcement and economic (read: leisure retail) development.

Nevertheless, after a few years, "many [contract cities] weaned themselves off such an intense level of privatism due to high costs and a lack of transparency" (Kass & Brasch, 2019, para. 17). Eventually, even Sandy Springs was forced to concede that their privatization model was perhaps not an inherent improvement over business as usual:

> When voters created the city of Sandy Springs, a cornerstone of their yet-to-be-built city hall was this: We will run this government like a business. For 14 years,

> leaders preached the power of the private sector, evangelizing the model to a slew of start-up cities. But after years of outsourcing the bulk of its workforce, Sandy Springs decided this week to bring most of those workers in-house. (Kass & Brasch, 2019, para. 1-3)

Yet, in Sandy Springs, the competitive, privatized model—what we will refer to herein as the *contract city* model—which was sold as panacea for the ostensible bloat and inherent unaccountability of local government lasted less than 15 years. Ironically, Sandy Springs was driven back to more traditional governance by both the rising costs of private contractors and a troubling lack of transparency such that, in one illustrative case, "CH2M Hill [contractor] fired Sandy Springs' public works director without the city's input or knowledge" (Kass & Brasch, para. 19).

In its contract city form, Sandy Springs represented a classic neoliberal project. David Harvey (2005, p.119) has characterized such efforts at neoliberalization as "genius" to the extent that they

> provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally.

Despite recent, premature calls to abandon neoliberalism as a theoretical apparatus in the face of growing illiberalism (as, e.g., in Brazil, the United States, India, and across Western Europe), the last few years have demonstrated that the salience of neoliberalism as a political rationale (Brown, 2015) has not been diminished (Plehwe, Slobodian, & Mirowski, 2020). Indeed, neoliberalism has merely been transformed in its encounter with

reactionary authoritarianisms both global and local (see Cozzolino, 2018; Fraser, 2023, 2017a, 2017b; Wraight, 2019).

Paul Amar positions these sorts of activities as co-constitutive with what he terms the 'human-security state'. Amar argues that the particular development of the human-security state challenges assumptions about neoliberalism's hegemony, as police and surveillance activities appear to contravene fundamental tenets of neoliberalism around devolution, responsibilization, and marketization of power. I would contend instead that such developments precisely track the neoliberal displacement of public obligation and welfare onto the patriarchal family unit and its constituent property (Cooper, 2017; Lewis, 2022). Such efforts further track the revanchist "social cleansing strategies" that have emerged elsewhere in the Atlanta suburbs (Markley & Allums, 2021). Neoliberalism is remade, not undone.

In particular, it is remade in the image of authoritarianism (Arsel, et al., 2021; Fraser, 2017a, 2017b; Giroux, 2018; Hendrikse, 2018), whereby more direct exercises of power replace the market nudges upon which neoliberalism has traded.[17] In the present conjuncture, simple austerity and privatization no longer guarantee the returns to white capital they once did. A regards secession, we have moved from the capital strike of the contract city to the protectionist political economy of authoritarian urbanism.

This movement between poles is not unique to the new secession for, as Marcuse argues, [neo]liberalism is "characterized as the organization of society through private enterprise on the basis of the recognition of private property and the private initiative of the entrepreneur," and, despite popular accounts that would seek to draw distinctions

[17] Of course, neoliberalism never was quite so decentered as it imagined itself to be.

between the two, "this very organization remains fundamental" to reactionary politics (p. 6).[18] Indeed, "[w]ith regard to the unity of this economic base, we can say it is *liberalism that 'produces' the reactionary movement as its own consummation*" (p. 13, emphasis added; see Polanyi 2001 and Lennard 2019 for similar accounts). In this case, the reactionary movement is an authoritarian project of police power organized around the reproduction of white property, but this is not the only form such a movement might take.

The 2020 movement for the City of Eagle's Landing offers a further case with which to illustrate this movement in the new secession. Where, as I have shown above, Atlanta's suburban secession boom since 2005 has been a color-blind, neoliberal phenomenon (Allums 2017; Connor 2015; Rosen 2017) articulated around a broadly conceived politics of growth and interurban competition (Harvey 1989), the movement for Eagle's Landing coheres around an alternative discourse (Mock 2018b) of racialized decline (viz. "[w]e don't want [Eagle's Landing] to go down") and loss of territorial control (viz. "if [Eagle's Landing] could happen, we'd have more control of our area, and we'd get to see what comes in here… and what it looks like"). Finally, unlike other cases, Eagle's Landing has emerged in response to rapid and significant demographic change in the surrounding area, as many Black families have relocated to Atlanta's southern suburbs. Indeed, Mock (2018b) writes that the movement for Eagle's Landing gained traction "just after a black mayor and an all-black city council took office." Its reactionary politics parallel, in tone and chronology, the historically resurgent white supremacy of the Trumpian right in the United States (see Inwood, 2019), as well as the revanchist "social

[18] Sections of this paragraph and the following two were previously published as "The new suburban secession: A postfascist turn in Atlanta's cityhood movement" in *Metropolitics* (2020).

cleansing strategies" that have emerged elsewhere in the Atlanta suburbs (Markley and Allums, 2021).

The transition from a relatively diverse but white-governed municipality to a Black-marked and -governed place represents a symbolic and material loss to many of Stockbridge's white residents. Stockbridge being marked as Black puts the city, in the eyes of Eagle's Landing boosters, at a distinct disadvantage in the competitive scramble for the crumbs of suburban investment. Short of white flight—which would, by definition, cede the territory over which the Eagle's Landing struggle is being contested—the answer to such a predicament under neoliberal racial capitalism can only be devising some simulacral technology capable of (re)producing the whiteness of a place. For example, in the Atlanta suburb of Marietta—a municipality that lost its white majority, but where white politicians maintained control over the levers of government—this was achieved through a "social cleansing strategy" that cleared thousands of minority-occupied apartment units (Markley & Allums, 2021). In Stockbridge, where the city council already reflects the city's new Black majority, the question of border work structures the racial project: secession via excision becomes the more viable response.

Like Eagle's Landing, the Buckhead movement seeks to dictate exclusive access to, development in, and imaginaries of itself. And while, unlike Stockbridge, the City of Atlanta's racial demographics haven't changed drastically in the last decades, there has been a reinvigoration of Black and multi-racial progressive power across the state, driven by both migration and urbanization, a rebalancing of political gravity in both the Atlanta metro and across the states.[19] As I have suggested above, the Buckhead movement seeks

[19] We can point to the election of Senators John Ossof and Raphael Warnock, as well as the now infamous attempts by former President Trump to pressure Republicans to "find the votes."

to resist such shifts by elevating certain elements of its urban genealogy and suppressing others towards a simulacral image of the community, by which any resistance to white hegemony can be laundered through a framework of neighborhood cohesion and community self-determination. I explode this image below, [un]grounding (Landau et al., 2021) the ostensibly coherent image of a genteel Buckhead cultivated by the BCC, demonstrating that its only possible coherence across a variegated history is in its concerted resistance to and extraction from Black power and culture in an uneven metro.

Images of Buckhead

Walter Benjamin (2002) articulates the phantasmagoria in his haunting study of the Parisian arcades. It is, among various other characterizations, a fetishized image that obscures historical forces, relations of production, and forms of value. Thus, Buckhead City, or at least

> [t]he image that it produces of itself in this way, and that it customarily labels as its culture, corresponds to the concept of phantasmagoria… 'in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being.' (Benjamin, 2002, p. 669)

The utility of phantasmagoria as a method of seeing the historically determined world—its ruins and its dreams—is multivalent. First, phantasmagoria conspicuously centers the sort of representational value with which Buckhead has long been associated, "not so much the commodity-in-the market as the commodity-on-display" (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. 81). Indeed, this desire to protect representational value leads directly into one of the more curious arguments in favor of Buckhead City, namely that the new city would block

attempts by the City of Atlanta to change zoning ordinances in order to build denser housing to serve the booming metro. In this simple form, the argument is not remarkable—it is classic NIMBY fare. What is interesting is that unlike many defensive efforts by white communities (see Markley & Allums, 2020), this attempt to prevent new housing development is not aimed, at least in the first order, at the potential residents who would occupy the housing. Rather, it singles out developers and institutional investors as the culprits who will unmake Buckhead. From a purely speculative, exchange value perspective, landowners should welcome the sort of inflationary pressures that intense development brings; demand for land would quickly raise bid prices for the large lots which comprise many of Buckhead's neighborhoods. But Buckhead was never simply real estate to be traded; it was always (also) image.

The malls, the grand mansions—these were never purely media of exchange value. Most crucially, though, the phantasmagoria provides a conceptual threshold from which to explode the coherence of the Buckhead image so thoroughly, reflexively centered by the BCC and its co-conspirators. Thus, here, we think (Taguchi, 2012) post-foundationally (Landau et al., 2021) with Benjamin in an attempt to [un]ground the authoritarian univocality (Koch, 2022) pursued as and through Buckhead City.

This phantasmagoria of Buckhead City "reifies the mythic elements" of such dreams as self-determination and collective power, though only as part of a specific dream image, which, "for all its material reality, ensures that the utopian promise of myth remains unrealized" (Beuck-Morss, 1991, p. 249). Rather than an historically-segregated commodity hell, the real Buckhead, we are given to understand, is quiet, peaceful, prosperous, verdant—all markers which are uniquely threatened by increasing crime and

proposed zoning changes. Bill White, during a townhall hosted by the Buckhead Council of Neighborhoods, characterizes Buckhead and its relationship to Atlanta thusly:

> The city of Atlanta, we believe, has exploited the beautiful people of Buckhead for way too long. And for so many years, in fact, they haven't taken advantage of our spirit, our work ethic and our generosity.

Elsewhere, he extols "our lovely community" which, but for the interloping criminals and corrupt Atlanta politicians, would have remained an idyllic constellation of "beloved neighborhoods."

Buckhead City seeks—variously and concurrently—to become Buckhead, to return to Buckhead, to realize Buckhead. Derrida characterizes such entanglements as hauntological. Thus, the specter of Buckhead always-already "affects and bereaves" Buckhead City "like the ghost it will become" (Derrida, 2006, p. 201). Just as all other concepts or images must, Buckhead City "begins before it begins" (p. 202), and, indeed, many other dreams must end before certain beginnings return again.

What follows is not a comprehensive history of Buckhead. I do not intend it as such. Rather, it is a constellation of moments. My aim in these vignettes is to lay bare those contingent foundations (Butler, 2007; Landau et al., 2021) which unselfconsciously structure the claims that Buckhead City makes upon space and community in its simulacral bid for secession. The hope is that this chapter's "juxtapositions of past and present undercut the contemporary phantasmagoria, bringing to consciousness the rapid half-life of the utopian element in commodities and the relentless repetition of their form of betrayal: the same promise, the same disappointment" (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. 293).

Buckhead as Image

Unlike many white suburban places in Atlanta that boast similar outward markers (e.g. John's Creek, which incorporated in 2006), Buckhead has a centuries-long history as an elite, possessive (Bonds, 2020; Lipsitz, 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2015) territory. Indeed, Buckhead's origins as an Atlanta neighborhood stretch back to the early 19th century, though its position as the sort of prestigious residential and commercial locale we encounter today only begins to coalesce around the turn of the 20th century (Barnard, 2009; Connor, 2015)—at this point Buckhead was still quite rural, an extramural counterpoint to the urbanizing postbellum City of Atlanta rather than a constituent element of its urban core (Durrett, 2014).

Barnard (2009) details the influx of prominent lawyers, congressmen, and other notable, white Atlantans who, by their cultural cache and growing real estate portfolios, begin to remake Buckhead in their image, indeed to make Buckhead as image. In the same way that "every epoch sees in images the epoch which is to succeed it" and leaves "traces in a thousand configurations of life, from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 170), these early residents imprinted upon the landscape a vision of white territoriality which has not yet succumbed to the Black Mecca.

(Neighbor)Hoods

One particular trace—a lingering ghost—begs us not speak of it: in the very heart of this genteel quarter, the resurgent Ku Klux Klan made their home. Spurred out of hibernation in the early 20th century by the Leo Frank murder and other racial unrest, the Klan set up shop in a mansion off of Peachtree Road, a property which is now owned by the Cathedral

of Christ the King and houses various church offices and residences, but which at that time and for many years was the Imperial Palace of the Klan (Barnard, 2009; Jackson, 1992).

The Imperial Wizard of the Klan maintained a separate residence on the same street during this period, while a factory less than a mile from the Imperial Palace churned out thousands of robes per day for chapters nationwide (Jackson, 1992). Even when declining membership in the middle of the 20th century required the Klan divest some of its more lucrative assets and relocate from the Peachtree mansion to more austere offices, the location preference remained. The final administrative home of the Klan in Atlanta now sits across from a boutique cupcake shop in the heart of Buckhead.

While this spatial genealogy of the Klan may seem far removed from the contestations of today, such an example simply reinforces the broader diagnosis: Buckhead—from the moment it enters the urban history of Atlanta in any meaningful way—is always-already a conspicuously possessive geography of whiteness. Its shifting articulations to the city which will eventually come to contain it are necessarily mediated as much by this fact as by the shifting nature of Black political power in Atlanta.

Annexation

Perhaps the most evocative instantiation of the Buckhead question—if we might loosely characterize it as such—concerns the original annexation of the area into the City of Atlanta in the middle of the 20th century. Anxiety around the implications of an impending majority-Black electorate and the desire to uphold a white supremacist social order in the city spurred city and state leaders to pursue “a spatial fix to thwart black political power” (Connor, 2015, p. 442). This fix took the form of Black vote dilution via the annexation of Buckhead, a project which was realized in 1951 by an act of the state legislature.

Interestingly, this focus on choosing voters as a viable technology of white supremacy itself prefigures the fundamental logics of the current secession movement as well as broader trends in gerrymandering, which have locked in antidemocratic right-wing majorities in states across the nation.

The immediate results of the Buckhead spatial fix were substantial, as overnight the City of Atlanta increased in size from 37 to 118 square miles while adding more than 100,000 white residents (Connor, 2015, p. 442), resulting in Black representation in the city dropping from 41% to 33% (Kruse, 2005, p. 38). While perhaps the most notorious due to its actual implementation, this effort was merely one instance of a decades-long trend of local leaders leveraging annexation and other forms of boundary work in order to balance the scales—both for and against—the emergent preponderance of Black political power (see Bayor, 1996, for a more detailed discussion of this history). Such maneuvering could not, though, stem the overwhelming tide of white flight in the 60s and 70s, so much so that, only a decade and a half after the annexation of Buckhead, Atlanta—determined to chase white votes northward—began to eye Sandy Springs as a potential annexation target, thus setting off the drive to secession via cityhood which concerns us herein.

Ray Lewis

The 34th Super Bowl, which capped the 1999 NFL postseason's stretch into the new millennium, dropped into Atlanta on the heels of a January ice storm. Ray Lewis came with it. Of this conjunctural triad—the big game, the ice storm, and Lewis—Atlanta recalls the latter two with some precision. What Ray Lewis did—or didn't—is too bound up in myth and noise and moral panic to ever be remembered as it was.

Let us rewind briefly: as the 90s became the early aughts, Atlanta's position as a mecca not just for Black people but for exuberant Black culture solidified (Hobson, 2017; Oakley et al., 2022). Leading the charge for the nascent ATL brand were increasingly lauded hip-hop outfits such as OutKast, Goodie Mob, and Organized Noize—all under the auspices of the Dungeon Family musical collective. And while the culture launched in the SWATS (Atlanta's historically Black southwest), it landed, meteorically, in Buckhead. Atlanta was, for a brief period, the unquestioned nightlife capital of the South. Thus, when Ray Lewis and his entourage went out after the Super Bowl, they found themselves just north of the Georgia Dome in Buckhead's East Village. In the early morning hours, outside of the nightclub that Lewis and company were partying, two men who had earlier squabbled with Lewis and his party were stabbed to death. Soon afterward the killings, "Lewis and 10 others drove off in [their] limo, where blood stains were later discovered" (Lyles, Jr., 2019).

While Lewis was never charged with murder and the details of the stabbings remain murky, the impact on Atlanta's party scene was drastic:

> In many ways, the transformation of Buckhead Village is the most tangible legacy of that incident. Lewis served probation and resumed his stellar football career. No one was ever convicted of the murders. But the bar-filled neighborhood was never the same, and one of the country's most decadent party scenes had officially fizzled. (Maese, 2019)

Here, we encounter Buckhead as Black, which Hankins et al. (2012) locate between 1990 and 2006. They describe how an increasingly visible and exuberant Black presence in the East Village area of Buckhead alongside a dubious narrative of increasing crime informed

more and more aggressive attempts to solve the problem of an interloping Black Buckhead. Resultant overpolicing eventually paved the way for redevelopment, following the familiar revanchist trends of neoliberal reterritorialization. But Atlanta doesn't publicly remember this backlash, nor its role in the aggressive redevelopment to follow. What we remember is Ray.

Jetset, or: Buckhead as White

Following the collapse of Buckhead's party scene, the area began rapidly to change:

> A developer, Ben Carter, started buying out long-term leases in the area…in 2007. Carter announced five high-end fashion boutiques, two restaurants, and two hotels in a billion-dollar Streets of Buckhead mixed use development, helping the Buckhead Alliance fulfill their goals to clean up the area. (Lyles, 2019)

Hankins et al. (2012, pp. 393-4) emphasize how this intentional new development was designed to

> reflect and attract wealth, which is, in the case of Buckhead, historically (and presently), white. Casting the development as a destination for international travelers who seek exclusive, luxury retailers, suggests that whiteness is not only defined vis-a-vis local (white) history and wealth but in the twenty-first century, whiteness includes the (global) hyper-wealthy.

In the wake of redevelopment, we see a conspicuous return to both the whiteness and exclusivity of the earlier Buckhead, a simulacral project capable of 'restoring the balance' in the community and thus, transitively, to the larger orbit of Atlanta's territorial constellations. Mayor Shirley Franklin looked forward to bringing "Milan and New York to Buckhead" as part of "the resurgence of Atlanta" (Lyles, 2019). But the phoenix that

rose from the ashes was not the same one that burned. Not a rebirth, then, but a burnt offering, a sacrifice at the altar of whiteness.

Buckhead City

In much the same way as Walter Benjamin encounters the relations of 19th century bourgeois society in the 20th century arcades of Paris, we can locate the ghosts of Buckhead in its present imaginaries, tracing the phantasmagoric fetish of the past, the dream-image of the future which represent bourgeois utopia back to itself. Despite such spectral articulations, the Buckhead City movement cannot claim a foregone, hermetic inheritance, as the image of Buckhead was always fractured, contested. Nor can it escape the penumbrae of those revanchist moments which shade the continuous will to exclusion central to the community's genealogy. Neither restoration nor revolution, the movement for Buckhead City can only assume its place in that permanent struggle to secure what Andrew Baldwin (2012) names white futurity.

Authoritarianism, Crime, and Police Power

The latest instantiation of this struggle revolves around crime. From the outset, as I have suggested in the first chapter of this dissertation, concern over crime has predominated in the push for Buckhead City. Official and informal communications from the BCC routinely cite violent crime statistics and, obliquely or directly, push the question of crime to the forefront of debate. Buckhead residents are, we are given to understand, "afraid to go out to dinner, get groceries, and even go for a jog": there "seems to be no end in sight to the rise in crime" as the "City of Atlanta can no longer protect our [Buckhead] residents from criminals" (BCC, 2022). "This has nothing to do with anything except lack of leadership,"

Brentin Mock (2021a, para. 19) quotes Bill White as claiming. “Rome is burning” and Buckhead City is necessary “to take control back from the crazies who are running these cities into the ground.”

This particular desire for control, the need to direct, dictate, and secure might be called authoritarian. The political geographer Natalie Koch (2022, p. 1) usefully characterizes authoritarianism as a

> political relationship defined by univocality and subordination of difference to a central authority or vision. Authoritarian space-time thus works through singularity; it collapses the multiplicity of time, space, voice, authority, and social imagination into one acceptable vision.

This relationship, she argues, is mediated not only by the variegations of space and scale which structure territory, but also by cultural genealogies and articulations to both past and future. Authoritarianism seeks to collapse the multiplicity of life, what Massey (2005) calls ‘stories-so-far’, into a single, acceptable, administrable vision, in other words to “control by limiting the possibility of others to access an open future” (Koch, 2022, p. 1) through particular practices grounded in specific space-times (see Glasius, 2018, 2017) and responsive to specific threats or dreams.

Such an authoritarian drive is manifest widely across the Buckhead City movement. Like its immediate antecedent, Eagle’s Landing (Allums & Markley, 2020), Buckhead City has emerged in response to intense concern from (some) community members over an inability to hermetically control broader access to the community, an inability to dictate broader development trends, to punish interlopers. This authoritarian drive, though—as I have suggested above—is perhaps most evident in the centrality of crime to the Buckhead

City movement. Such an emphasis tracks broader movements in armed reactionary politics, particularly those which coalesce around the Blue Lives Matter slogan. The emblem of this movement is likely familiar to all American readers: a thin blue line horizontally transecting a greyscale American flag, symbolizing that noble bulwark which defends the deserving citizenry above from its constitutive other below. In the case of Buckhead, we can interpret the thin blue line in quite a literal sense, i.e., as circumscribing, through boundary work, a territory wherein residents can be protected from the incursion of rampant criminality and deviance.

There is, of course, a broad and incisive literature on the uses of crime in urban politics (see Markley & Allums, 2020. In particular, scholars have given attention to the ways in which racialized concerns over crime inform and structure revanchist (Smith, 1998) political projects in cities, underwrite urban redevelopment, and generally stand in for a whole host of social and political problems construed as endemic to the urban. There is also a series of epistemic problems at play with respect to the credibility of the crime narrative. To begin, popular discourses on crime almost universally ignore white-collar offenses (such as wage theft, defamation, insider trading, failure to pay, and other financial crimes), while clearance rates for white-collar crime are at historic lows (Clifton et al, 2017). Yet, in places like Buckhead, such crime is extensive (Clifton et al., 2017). The second problem has to do with the role of police as data-collectors and storytellers—journalists regularly accept police reports as factual, despite significant evidence (Beckett & Clayton, 2021; Evans, 2022; Lennard, 2022), while police have incentives to exaggerate violent crime. The result is that our everyday understandings of the rate and risk of crime are vastly overinflated.

But even if we were to take at face value the questionable empirical claims about violent crime deployed in support of secession—if we accepted the concomitant narratives—we would still miss the forest for the trees. Gun violence is unique and endemic to the United States (Blanchfield, 2018). The idea that such horrors are attributable to the isolated actions of "crazy" interlopers rather than symptomatic of a broader culture of settler violence mired in a conjunctural series of interrelated crises (see Allums, Kurtz, & Hafley, 2018; Blanchfield, 2018) is indefensible. Add to this mixture an almost unfettered access to firearms and the match is struck. Indeed, what is unbearable about crime in the United States is not the specificity of any nominal wave or individual act but the background levels of (racialized, gendered) violence which structure our everyday lives.

Thus, the BCC claim that a "larger police presence" will necessarily, swiftly, and substantially "decrease crime" bears some further scrutiny. In the last several years, the Black Lives Matter movement—responding to the unchecked killing of Black people by law enforcement—has shined the spotlight on the institution of policing in the United States, encouraging journalists and scholars to critically assess all manner of common assumptions about the nature and practice of law enforcement. Some, as I have suggested above, challenge police reporting methods (Evans, 2022; Richardson et al., 2019). Others have investigated body cameras and other accountability measures (Evans, 2022; St. Louis et al., 2019). The problem of white nationalism within law enforcement has been a frequent object of critique, as has the nature of relationships between US domestic police forces and US military and border enforcement (Jones, 2022; Lennard 2022; Miller, 2014). Even more fundamentally damaging to the mythology of policing, though, has been the growing body

of evidence suggesting that police simply don't stop crime so much as reproduce systems of control (Amar, 2013; Bradford & Loader, 2016; Lennard, 2022; Loader, 2013)

Nevertheless, in painting his picture for the Buckhead police state, White (2021) specifically invokes "Bill Bratton, who's the man who cleaned up New York from being pretty bad to one of the safest large cities, the safest large city in America." Putting aside mountain of evidence produced in the last decade demonstrating the failure—and massive social costs—of Bratton's "broken windows" policing (e.g., Bradford & Loader, 2016; Harcourt, 2005), when we compare NYC to, say, London or Paris or any other significant metropolis outside of the United States, this narrative collapses. A BCC promotional video further promises that Buckhead City "would lobby to tighten bail and sentencing rules." Again, the evidence suggests that such tough on crime policies

This emphasis on crime tracks broader trends in national news coverage over the same period (see Beckett & Clayton, 2021; Michaels, 2021)—it also shares their weaknesses and elisions. For instance, Buckhead City supporters are quick to deploy grisly, local news anecdotes. As affectively stirring as such tales may be, the data tell a more measured tale. Crime in Buckhead—in parallel to decades-long national trends—is on a downward trajectory (Nouryeh-Clay, 2023). More broadly, the beginnings of the Buckhead City movement coincided with the world historic dislocations of the COVID-19 pandemic, such that one-year spikes in specific crime categories, which the BCC prefers to cite, have very little significance to broader interpretations of crime risk and are unreliable points from which to suggest a broader trend.

In response to the ostensible problem of crime in Buckhead, BCC offers but one solution:

> Buckhead City will have its own police force. With the Buckhead City Police Department, our police will be respected, fully staffed, appropriately trained, and properly funded. We currently have approximately 80 police officers assigned to Buckhead with only about 20 officers on shift at a time. We will increase our police force to 250 with close to 80 officers on shift at all times. A larger police presence that is allowed to do their job will decrease crime dramatically and quickly. (BCC, 2022)

The emphasis here on respect for police as a pre-condition for safety is telling. Giving testimony to the state legislature in 2021, White (2021) offers the sort of unverifiable, apocryphal pablum that is the bread and butter of affective politicking:

> I was leaving a Brookhaven establishment the other day, and a police officer was there. I went up and thanked him and he told me he was a sergeant in the Atlanta Police Department. I talked to him and he explained to me that he felt that the Atlanta police has been demoralized, it has been vilified and that the committing folks of crime are being victimized as victims…almost 450 Atlanta police officers have quit the job because of the lack of respect, appreciation and honor that we should be giving them.

More broadly, he asserts:

> We need to hire cops, but you're not going to ever to be able to hire a cop unless you truly convince them that you love and respect them. And so that's what we're going to do. And we're going to show the rest of the state how you hire 10,000 Cops and we're gonna get it done.

For White and cronies, the issue is not (simply) a quantitative consideration; it is, rather, a matter of reestablishing a particular rule of law, a deference to a form of state violence which has recently come under heavy scrutiny in Atlanta and elsewhere (Amar, 2013; Neocleous, 2021).

Authoritarianism, Freedom, & the Politics of Fear

To what, then, should we attribute the fixation on crime and policing in the wake of the failure of the contract city model? There are some compelling explanations. The first, and most obvious, is that the historical imbrication of armed policing—both institutional and vigilantist—and whiteness (Allums, Kurtz, & Hafley, 2018; Blanchfield, 2022; Inwood & Bonds, 2017) overdetermines the reflexive summoning of the former in service of the latter; the salve for any wound to whiteness is always-already prescribed. Thus, when new threats to white property are perceived or invented under racial capitalism, the (re)deployment of policing is, to a very real extent, preordained.

We might also locate the policing fetish in the aesthetic tendencies of authoritarian politics per se. Walter Benjamin (1969a, p. 241) contends that the authoritarian project "sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves." In much the same way as the wearing of MAGA paraphernalia is reflective of a sort of aesthetic politics of authoritarianism, the use of pro-police signs, flags, and slogans to ideologically claim space (see Goonewardena, 2005) is important to what Jason Luger (2022, p. 10) conceptualizes as the "everyday geographical production" of authoritarian reaction, which is "performed in a celebratory and often joyous nature…around specific issues, events, and resistances." We might think of Donald Trump

responding gleefully to calls for defunding and disarming police forces or skewering—in grotesque personal terms—his political enemies. In such cases, the personal and the aesthetic intersect a racialized politics of fear and *ressentiment*.

To further pursue this problem, I turn briefly to psychoanalysis. Blanchfield (2018) asserts the utility of psychoanalytic approaches to social problems, emphasizing the former's careful attention to "logics of disavowal, repression, and conceptual foreclosure." Psychoanalysis, as a hermeneutic of suspicion (Felski, 2012; Ricoeur, 1970; Scott-Baumann, 2009), "subjects declarations of clear intentionality, impersonal rationality, and univocal meaning to scrutiny" (Blanchfield, 2018, p. 198), thus "uncovering goals and values that people are generally unaware that they are pursuing" (Smelser, 1998, p. 30. In this sense, psychoanalysis represents a post-foundational hermeneutic, an approach to [un]grounding (Landau et al., 2021) a given social order. More immediately, though, psychoanalysis "takes a particular interest in both personal and cultural experiences of fear, violence, aggression, and loss, and their relationship to questions of identity" (Blanchfield, 2018, p.198; see also, Zaretsky, 2005).

Fanon (1967/2008) argues similarly that psychoanalysis helps us to diagnose the unreason which stems from alienation, but he places the source of that alienation specifically and firmly in the colonial, racist ontologies of modernity. Rationalizations of racial order, of exclusion, of violence are not authentic or reasonable communications for Fanon. Rather, such rationalizations are a product of racism's interference with a universal capacity for intersubjective reason, they are spontaneous, cliched emissions epiphenomenal to—and reproductive of—the broader, violent legacies of racial

differentiation and domination. Fanon argues that this inability to think outside of such ossified rubrics is a sign of a narcissism incompatible with either reason or true freedom.

We can, I think, productively apply Fanon's analysis to the problem of authoritarian secession. The focus on policing that we encounter in the section above is unreasonable in Fanon's terms, which is to say that it is largely detached from any sort of attempt to meaningfully solve crime or prevent violence or even communicate intersubjectively; rather, the imbrication of policing with secession "produces space and territorializes in ways that are joyful, celebratory, and…life affirming" for secessionists (Luger, 2022). Authoritarian secessionists celebrate police because the violence of policing will never be directed at them, because policing only ever serves their interests and targets perceived threats to the possessive geographies of whiteness, because policing is part of a spontaneous rationalization which seeks unsuccessfully to come to terms with the reality of alienated life. Police thus provide security—both material and psychic—regardless of their ability to reduce crime.

When we understand the authoritarian will to secession as a psychoanalytic symptom, a spontaneous rationalization of already-existing racial capitalist exploitation rather than a deliberative matter of effective service provision, a great deal comes into sharper focus, particularly the contradiction of authoritarian freedom. The demand for freedom—the 'right to determine our fate' that BCC articulates in a press release from 2022—has been at the center of the Buckhead movement since its inception. Buckhead City imagines authoritarian exclusivity over possessive investment to be the ultimate horizon of white freedom in an increasingly non-white metro. In this, though, they are not

far off from either the original promise of the Sandy Springs movement[20] nor the more gentile contours of its later and more successful iterations. Yet, as Fanon (1967/2008) insists, any meaningful freedom requires nothing less than the transformation of the world. Koch (2022, p. 1) points us to Simone de Beauvoir (1949, p. 82), who contends similarly that freedom "interested only in denying freedom" is no freedom, that freedom must rather "emerge into an open future." The freedom that secession promises, rather, is merely a freedom to make others unfree.

Conclusion: Reterritorializing Secession

In many instances, as Inwood (2019) and others have shown, possessive boundary work takes the form of counterrevolutionary politics, a reaction *against* perceived threats to whiteness. This analysis holds true, as I have shown herein, in the case of the new secession. Sandy Spring's mid-century revolt was a reaction to the imminent threat of a hostile annexation into geographies of increasing Black power, just as Buckhead's attempt at secession is a means of resisting Black incursion.

But we cannot gloss over the extent to which such a reaction is necessarily informed by an alternative, white futurity (Baldwin, 2012) that interprets possibilities within a particular configuration of meaning and value inseparable from the possessive geographies of whiteness. We can see this sort of anticipatory negotiation prefigured in the history of Buckhead itself; the original annexation effort in 1951 explicitly gestured at fear of an increasingly non-white future as impetus for reterritorialization. While, as I have attempted to demonstrate above, this white futurity can be realized through multiple ideological

[20] Rosen (2017) remembers it to us: to "build up a city separate from Atlanta and your Negroes and forbid any Negroes to buy, or own, or live within our limits."

frames and political ontologies, at its core is the spontaneous rationalization (Fanon, 1967/2008) of white property (Harris, 1996).

Property under racial capitalism—imagined more or less exclusively—becomes a mechanism for what Foucault (2008, pp. 63-64) characterizes as "the management and organization of the conditions in which one can be free…the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations." Foucault is clear that the production of freedom—in this case through property—relies upon and contains within itself the limits of freedom, the reality of unfreedom. Marcuse (2009) similarly argues that one of the central, freedom-negating forms around which the liberal production of freedom is organized and administered is property. In other words, freedom even under a cosmopolitan [neo]liberalism is still predicated on property per se, just as property forms the unquestionable precondition, the grounds (Landau et al., 2021) for freedom itself. One of many things with which I am seeking to come to terms throughout this project is: how else might we be free? And, more particularly: how does such a privatized, racialized, constrained notion of freedom as that espoused by the Buckhead City movement—one which is predicated on exclusion and accumulation through boundary-making—preclude a common freedom? How, to return to Fanon's language, does the narcissism of racialized, bourgeois categories stand in the way of the transformation of the world?

The problem at hand, then, is not secession, not boundary change *per se*—expectations of fixity are not only unrealistic but also, as decades of critical interventions (e.g. Lefebvre, 2013, 1992; Massey, 2005) have insisted, deeply anti-geographic—but rather the working of boundaries (Chapter 3) towards the dictates of racial capitalism. In what remains, I wish to work through a few brief examples of counter-hegemonic, radical

secessions and, by so doing, reterritorialize (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009) the concept of secession and the spaces of self-determination.

The practice of *secessio plebis*—or plebeian secession—in ancient Rome offers a compelling, radical counter to secession democracy. Similar in purpose and execution to a general strike, the *secessio plebis* involved a mass, organized abandonment of the city center—and thus of urban commerce writ large—by the common classes in pursuance of political and economic demands against the state and the elite classes of Roman society (see Mignone, 2016). Similarly, the Vienna secession, led by the noted 19th century painter Gustav Klimt, advanced an internationalist, anti-commercialist, and non-hierarchical art movement, seceding (their won terminology) from the Association of Austrian Artists, which reinforced such bourgeois strictures (Charles & Carl, 2011). The most famous material legacy of this movement, the Secession Building, in addition to displaying works producing by Secessionist artists, still carries on its threshold the Secessionist motto: *To every age its art, to every art its freedom*. Finally, we might consider the contemporary effort for Catalan secession from the Spanish state, a movement with deep roots in anti-Francoist and anti-assimilationist politics. Catalan separatists seek self-determination and independence for the long-marginalized Catalan people, their cultural traditions and ancestral territorial claims against the modern Castilian state.

Such examples make clear the extent to which the uses of secession, of boundaries writ large, need not simply reproduce or reconfigure dominant forms of social organization, space, or hegemonic power relations. Neither neoliberal nor authoritarian, then, but a radical secession, which, in Fanon's terms and in the spirit of a broader abolition democracy (Du Bois, 1935/1998; Gilmore, 2002; Olson, 2004) transforms the world.

CHAPTER 6

CODA: AGAINST SECESSION DEMOCRACY

I began this dissertation with an elaboration of three problematics—Race, Democracy, and [Urban] Political Economy—within which the work to come would be situated. Having developed my arguments and concepts in the prior three chapters, I wish to return briefly to this schema to contextualize the contributions I hope to have made.

Chapter 3's conceptualization of boundary work offered a conspicuously spatialized reading of racial capitalism, speaking directly to questions of race, racism, and racecraft. Building from Gilmore's power/difference formula, I linked the realization of race to political economy through the dialectical accounts of Du Bois, Winant, and Olson and the emergent geographic theory of white possession. I demonstrated, further, that boundary work is conceptually necessary in order to counter conventional accounts of boundary changes under urban democracy and to understand the function of actually-existing democracy, which limits true democratic freedom by allowing the secession of white communities.

In an applied sense, it is also this conceptual invigoration of boundary work that perhaps stands out as most significant. Its timeliness, at least, cannot be denied. Indeed, as I wrote this concluding chapter, in the summer of 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States—in a surprising move, given its current ideological composition—affirmed that states do not possess unilateral control over the administration of elections, thereby rendering certain racially gerrymandered political maps in North Carolina unusable and

requiring their redrawing in equitable fashion.[21] The salience of racialized boundary work at multiple scales will only continue to grow as Republicans and political reactionaries seek any technical toehold, any potential gimmick against the popular force of an increasingly diverse electorate unconvinced by their political rhetoric. When the game cannot be won, the rules must be altered—this is, exclusively, the possessive prerogative of whiteness.

Chapter 4 took a post-foundational approach to the new secession. In specifying the role and genealogy of the taxpayer in American racial capitalism, it linked contemporary exercises in racialized urban governance to relevant post-Reconstruction political histories and laid bare the extensive imbrication of white tax concerns with racial capitalist power. Further, it used the particulars of the new secession to describe how, under actually-existing democracy, particular institutional mechanisms and objects—in this case, the feasibility study and the referendum—come to stand in for true democratic governance at multiple scales. Finally, it challenged scale itself as a legitimate object of political movements, demonstrating instead how a scalar fetish in local democracy is mediated by both racial and political economic concerns.

This work on the foundations of the new secession is immediately and directly applicable in the ongoing struggle against such movements in Atlanta. One of the central difficulties of resisting, of struggling against secession is that its loudest opponents actually agree with many fundamental elements of the secessionary platform. They accept that crime is out of control, accept that police are the solution. Secessionist values around property, zoning control, and aesthetics are largely shared by their opponents, grounded in

[21] Of course, in the very same session, this Supreme Court struck down affirmative action in college admissions. While it appears other mechanisms for the consideration of race in admission may yet persist, this ruling nonetheless strikes a serious blow to racial equality in higher education.

a shared bourgeois understanding of the good life and a desire to protect their own possessive investment. Opponents accept, by and large, what Highsmith (2020) calls the "structural violence of municipal hoarding," the idea that communities should be able to isolate and protect their accumulated treasures from municipal redistribution.[22] There are, of course, more radical critiques of secession coming predominantly from Black communities in Atlanta and from various scholars and journalists. Nevertheless, the organizational entities arrayed against, those with the capacity to best make themselves heard fail to challenge the basic assumptions of secessionist movements and thus legitimize and perpetuate secessionists as but one more faction in a broader regime politics. Taking an axe to the root of these movements—rather than debating them on the merits—is the only way to effectively counter such efforts.

Finally, Chapter 5 introduces authoritarianism as relevant to current urban political debates. While a few scholars have begun to reckon with urban authoritarianism, it remains severely understudied within and outside of geography. This chapter not only elaborates the form and function of such a politics, but also does the crucial work of linking it to prior formations of neoliberal political economy, which have been exhaustively studied within geography. I show, too, how the sort of meaningful freedom that Fanon (1967/2008), Gilmore (2002), and others envision as the aim of unalienated life is precluded by the racial, economic, and political hegemony of whiteness and its concomitant logics and geographies of possession. I demonstrate how whiteness advances and reproduces particular images of

[22] Recall, for instance, that one of the loudest opponents of the Buckhead City movement was the attorney and former state representative Ed Lindsey, who was instrumental in ensuring the success of the Sandy Springs movement in 2005.

itself in furtherance of this hegemony and characterize its eminent flexibility in support of racial capitalist spatial configurations.

As a political text, this chapter sheds crucial light onto the emergent problem of [post?]neoliberal authoritarian politics. It is quite clear to me—and I think I have demonstrated convincingly—that neoliberalism is not dead, neither as a political rationale nor an economic regime. Neither, though, is it the same neoliberalism of the 80s, 90s, and 00s. Whether we look to Biden's (at least) rhetorical Keynesianism or Trump's reactionary bent, the sedate, post-political image of neoliberalism no longer fits so well as once it did. We need geographic accounts of the shifts currently underway in neoliberal governance, one which emphasizes the continuities with classical neoliberalism just as carefully as their divergences. The power of emergent authoritarianism on the right, in my view, is that it is currently slithering into a world that has already been ravaged by neoliberalism, where austerity already reins, where collective capacity has been obliterated, where notions of citizenship and belonging have been so effectively prostrated to the demands of the market that an effective, counter-hegemonic politics feels some days like a dream.

Moreso than any individual theoretical or political contribution, though, it is the recognition, indeed the insistence, that problems of race, democracy, and political economy cannot be considered individually that I see as the central lesson of this work. Race is materialized through political economy, economic logic shot through with racial foundations, citizenship mediated by proximity to whiteness, true democracy sealed off from social reproduction, public will be prostrated to private value, racial capitalist stability ensured by police power, universal freedom precluded by the possessive geographies of whiteness and the project of white freedom writ large. Attempts to solve such stark, thorny

problems in any sort of universal manner are hindered by racialized gerrymandering and voter suppression, struck down by unelected and unrepresentative courts, buried by corporate citizenship and lobbying, and, of course, thwarted by secession. Secession democracy, as a concept, attempts to capture this mutual imbrication of race, political economy, and actually-existing democracy, to demonstrate how their interconnections continue to preclude universal freedom, collective thriving, and true democratic self-determination.

At the Crossroads: Abolition or Secession

Secession democracy is, of course, quite the opposite of what Astra Taylor (2019) and others intend when they invoke democracy; indeed Taylor specifically calls such a politics undemocratic—for her, democracy is realized in a sort of permanent revolution. In Derridean language, we might think of democracy as an ethical commitment to perpetual deconstruction, a commitment to going beyond. Thus, the democratic is not a place but a process, a way of being-in-the-world. We might—following W.E.B. Du Bois, Joel Olson, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, among many others—call this principle, this promise, this horizon abolition democracy. In the United States, abolition democracy—the reaching for that unrealizable ideal, the indefatigable will to self-rule—is constrained by secession democracy. The reality is that secession democracy, from the point of view of radical, emancipatory, or abolitionist politics, is precisely the realization of someone else's utopia. As I have shown herein, it precludes the pursuit of abolition democracy by actively reproducing its own exclusive foundations in white property.

I wish to clearly reiterate: it is not only over those moments and actions which we can, with the benefit of hindsight, easily name as secession that the valences of secession democracy loom. In the first week of 2021, echoing state-level takeovers in Michigan and elsewhere during the prior summer, armed protesters stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the legitimate transition of presidential power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden. Despite their demonstrated capacity for forceful response to non-violent popular action, police failed to halt the violent occupation of multiple federal buildings by white supremacists and other extremist elements of the American right. A century and a half after the close of the Civil War, the Confederate battle flag waved in the halls of the US Congress, re-inscribing into a new conjuncture that always- and never-American symbol. It states again: the political project of whiteness always-already resists the potentiality—the becoming-real—of a check on its territorial and ideological ambitions, even to the point of sedition. This is the essence of secession democracy.

Secession democracy, as such examples demonstrate, consists in the strategic repression of the political (here, again, I have in mind Rancierre's [1999] formulation) in those moments when it threatens to erupt, to assert itself even through those narrowest cracks of parliamentarism. When insurrections are attempted; when non-representative jurists or gerrymandered supermajorities dictate and constrain rights; when voting rights are attacked; when white communities secede from responsibility by disenfranchising certain populations—these are not a betrayal of democracy *per se*; indeed, they are fundamental to the contemporary form of actually-existing democracy.

So. What does it mean to struggle for justice under secession democracy? It means, I think, to refuse not to see. It means to take from melancholy not despair, but a

disconcertment that organizes our energies against a violent, hegemonic form of life which seeks only its own stability. It means—even in the darkest moments of racial capitalist excess—leaving unforeclosed the possibility that the marginalized and repressed "shall yet inherit this turbulent earth" (Du Bois, 2016, p.1).

We are left, then, with a choice, one in which we must, following Rosa Luxembourg's famous dictum, elect either abolition or secession, universal freedom or freedom for some. The two cannot co-exist. The aim, then, for those of us committed to the struggle for justice, must be to remake actually-existing democracy, which today carries the form of secession democracy, in the image of abolition, to smash the distinction between the ideal of freedom and self-determination and the everyday and institutional practices as they actually exist, to provide for what Lefebvre understands as the "worlding of the philosophical as a vibrant, human praxis" (Allums, 2019, p. 89).

Before the close, I wish to turn again to Taylor (2019, p. 312). In the final analysis, true democracy is not a proposal or vision to be enacted; it is, rather, a constant struggle.

> Change is a democratic constant, with no solid ground in sight. We inhabit what Gramsci called an interregnum, a 'new world struggling to be born.' Instead of founding fathers let us aspire to be perennial midwives, helping always to deliver democracy anew. Democracy may not exist and yet it still might.

Taylor helps us to think secession democracy, helps us to think all manner of morbid systems which, shapeshifting, emerge upon the landscape, which haunt the broader exercise of self-determination in the United States. She also insists that we accept the lack of safety in institutions, that we face clear-eyed the impossibility of solid ground.

Democracy may not exist. And yet, it still might.

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APPENDIX A

"A BETTER PLACE TO BE"? BLACK MECCA, WHITE DEMOCRACY, AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF NEOLIBERAL CITYHOOD IN ATLANTA'S BLACK SUBURBS[23]

[23] Allums, C.A., Markley, S.M., & Hafley, T.J. (2021). *Journal of Urban Affairs, 44*(6), 793-807. Reprinted here with permission of the publisher.

Abstract

In November of 2016, the City of Stonecrest was carved out of Atlanta's suburban Black Mecca. The hope was that the new city's "brand" might bring development and increased wealth to an area which has borne the brunt of uneven development, racialized urban secession, and racial capitalism for many decades. The case of Stonecrest points to several interesting tensions, contradictions, and necessary reckonings around race, class, and neoliberal urban space in Atlanta. We reconsider the historical politics of the Black Mecca alongside contradictory geographies of racialized housing policy, arriving at an analysis of Stonecrest as a project of White democracy that fails to challenge the material and ideological conditions of its own subordination. We build from this analysis to argue that abolition democracy in Atlanta must work to transcend not only the particulars of its own history (and that of Atlanta more broadly) but the hegemony of neoliberal racial capitalism as well.

> There are several major U.S. cities that want Amazon, but none has the branding opportunity we are now offering this visionary company … How could you not want your 21st century headquarters to be located in a city named Amazon?
>
> —Mayor Jason Lary, City of Stonecrest, Georgia

Introduction

In November of 2016, the City of Stonecrest was carved out of the middle-class southern corner of unincorporated DeKalb County, east of the City of Atlanta. The northern portion of the county is home to largely White communities and commercial areas, while the southern portion remains, despite its historical position as part of Atlanta's storied Black Mecca (Hankins & Holloway, 2020; Hobson, 2017), relatively underdeveloped, infrastructurally isolated, and almost exclusively Black. Even so, the boundaries of Stonecrest set an island of relative wealth off from unincorporated South DeKalb.

The case of Stonecrest points to several interesting tensions, contradictions, and necessary reckonings around race, class, and geography, several of which we seek to come to terms with throughout this article. In particular, we ask questions about history, memory, property, and racialized space as produced by and productive of a dialectical politics of the Black Mecca in Atlanta. Critically, this includes interrogating the central paradox of Black cityhood movements as emerging from historically White supremacist technologies of suburban secession. Building on work in political theory around White democracy—which Olson (2004, p. xxi) characterizes as the political structure and set of relations by which the hegemonic "political values of the White citizen [in the United States] bundle racial privilege with democratic ideals"—we argue that an abolition democracy in Atlanta, one which allows for meaningful self-determination, must work to transcend not only the

historical and ideological particulars of the Black Mecca (and that of Atlanta more broadly) but the hegemony of neoliberal racial capitalism and White democracy writ large.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the plan for the paper, we wish to offer two brief clarifications at the outset. The first pertains to our argument just summarized. Our critique in this paper is of the Stonecrest cityhood movement in the context of the larger wave of secessionist cityhood efforts that have dramatically reshaped Metro Atlanta's political landscape over the past 15 years and is thus *not* directed at the general project of Black placemaking. Following Hunter and Robinson (2018), we understand Black placemaking efforts as crucial projects for Black communities to achieve relative autonomy within an otherwise inhospitable society. Although we can understand the temptation to read Stonecrest as an example of Black placemaking —a "Chocolate City" (Hunter & Robinson, 2018) where residents can strive despite constraints—we must stress that Stonecrest, as it has been envisioned by its champions, represents something quite different.

The second clarification addresses our usage of the term *Black Mecca*. The Black Mecca, as we will detail in later sections of this paper, has been invoked by variously positioned actors in multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory ways. It is, no doubt, a place, or a part of a place, or one of several places. It is an idea, a utopian possibility. It is a political project: a lost cause or a still-to-be-realized and ongoing struggle. It is liberatory, yes, but also distinctly bourgeois and conformist (Frazier, 1957). Rather than attempt to resolve these various significations, or to isolate one above the rest, we choose to let the tension resonate. In this, we take our cue from Jameson's (2014) dialectical critique of representation in social inquiry, whereby, "social class is at one and

the same time a sociological idea, a political concept, a historical conjuncture, an activist slogan, yet *a definition in terms of any one of these perspectives alone is bound to be unsatisfactory*" (p. 7, emphasis our own). Thus, we begin with and insist on the position that the Black Mecca "cannot be defined, it can only be provisionally approached in a kind of parallax, which locates it in the absent center of a multiple set of incompatible approaches" (Jameson, 2014, p. 7). If we approach it too directly, with too obvious an intent, we risk startling into flight and incoherence that very constellation which forms the "absent center" of the present work.

With that initial representational problem addressed, we proceed to the plan for the paper. The following section traces the genealogy of the cityhood movement, which emerges as a mode of White suburban secession in the early 2000s and is then taken up as a defensive technology in Black suburban communities, including Stonecrest, in the following decade. In this section, we draw from both interviews and critical historical accounts to reconstruct the broader discourse within which the debates around cityhood have been positioned. The third section then probes the utopian ideal of a Black Mecca—alongside some historical attempts at its realization—and further considers the relationship of the movement for a City of Stonecrest to the ideals and historical limitations of the Black Mecca, building upon interviews with Black supporters of Stonecrest and White and Black supporters of the cityhood movement writ large. The fourth section brings together the prior two, arguing that the logics of White democracy and neoliberal racial capitalism severely constrain the potential for an emancipatory democracy. The paper concludes with a rumination on these contradictions in light of the City of Stonecrest's failed bid for Amazon's HQ2 project.

A Genealogy: The Anti-politics of Cityhood

The City of Sandy Springs, the first of Atlanta's new cities and the widely-acknowledged template for those that have followed, has its roots in overtly White supremacist projects of urban secession (Connor, 2015). And, despite its "rigid refusal" (Baldwin, 1998) to acknowledge as much, it remains a project of White democracy in practice. Indeed, the origins of Sandy Springs' urban secessionism extend back to the 1960s, when White homeowners rallied together to thwart attempts by the City of Atlanta to annex a part of unincorporated Fulton County, north of its boundary. Opponents to annexation framed their opposition in overtly racist terms, expressing a deep fear of being subject to Black political control and subsequent desegregation (Bayor, 1996, pp. 87–88).

The "Committee for Sandy Springs" was established in 1974, and it initially advocated local autonomy as a means to control racial integration and limit the construction of apartments that would likely house people of color (Lanari, 2017). Later, as Lanari (2017, 2019) notes, the committee replaced its anti-civil rights platform with a platform that extolled the virtues of privatized local government. The arguments for incorporation changed in that mentions of race were dropped, but the results of incorporation would be the same: affluent Whites would be granted the ability to enact exclusionary policies. Indeed, Oliver Porter—architect of the successful incorporation of Sandy Springs—told us that political and academic charges of racial injustice brought against Sandy Springs are frivolous because "Sandy Springs is about 30% minorities," despite the fact that the movement for a City of Sandy Springs was initially couched in explicitly White supremacist language. We can view this transition in racial discourse as the result of an increasing hegemony of colorblind racism in the latter part of the 20th century

(Allums, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Despite such discursive shifts, secessionist efforts were stymied until the early 21st century by a mix of political opposition and procedural rules in the state legislature.

The discourse around contemporary cityhood constructs and presumes the practice and places of urban secession to be "without history" (Foucault, 1980) in any relevant sense. This discourse "completely reject[s] any version of … history that connects the cityhood movement to the racism of decades past" (Rosen, 2017), and insists upon "fundamentally ahistorical terms" (Allums, 2017). To understand this ahistorical analytical approach, we might, following Rosen, turn again to Porter. Despite his central involvement with the incorporation and privatized management of Sandy Springs, Porter makes it clear that he wants nothing to do with politics. Rosen quotes him as saying, "Compromise doesn't make sense to me. It's right or it's wrong—there's nothing in between." Porter's insistence that he is an apolitical actor motivated simply by what is right (in his case, economic efficiency and a distaste for progressive taxation)—and that Sandy Springs and other new cities are, by extension, apolitical entities—obscures the nature of what he considers to be apolitical and self-evident certainties but which are, in practice, deeply ideological and political claims about how the world does and should work.

Allums (2017) has theorized the conditions of possibility for this ahistoricism as rooted in a racialized anti-politics of space and in a political economy of "imagineering" (Rutheiser, 1996) and social amnesia. Others (e.g., Connor, 2015; Lanari, 2019; Mock, 2018) concur in broader terms with this diagnosis, suggesting that the cityhood movement relies on a particular rendering of history which casts prior moments of racialized exclusion to a before-time inaccessible and irrelevant to the spatial politics of

contemporary society. Thus, far from a neutral technology of worldmaking, or a disruptive mode of innovative governance, the new cityhood movement carries (and buries) the traces (Allums, 2019; Bloch, 2006) of a particular social history and intersects a particular social space.

When Republicans eventually gained control over both houses of the state legislature in 2004, one of their first actions was to modify rules and restrictions governing where and how a new city might form in the State of Georgia. Circumventing oppositional political pressure, this move allowed for the long-prefigured formation of the City of Sandy Springs. Porter, unsurprisingly, chalks this up to an ahistorical Republican preference for shrinking bureaucracy and "breaking down government." He could, he assured us, describe why "the Democrats opposed these changes," but that he was "not going to" do so "on the record." Thus, in 2005—supported by 94% of eligible voters—Sandy Springs came into being as both place and ideology, and suburban secession through cityhood was inaugurated in Atlanta.

Since Sandy Springs' incorporation, Atlanta's new cityhood movement—which we understand as a technology of suburban secession (Connor, 2015)—has emerged as a significant political force in the metro area. Over the last 15 years, the movement has transformed the suburban landscape by condensing and bounding the accrued historical advantages of Whiteness, producing expulsions, annexations, and abdications (Allums, 2017; Allums & Markley, 2020; Connor, 2015; Lanari, 2019; Mock, 2018; Rosen, 2017).

All told, ten of these new cities currently dot the suburban landscape of Atlanta, most circumscribing various pockets of the wealthy, White North (see Figure 1[A.1]). In the

southeastern Black suburbs, frustration over historically uneven development and concern over potentially being left holding the bag of DeKalb County's debt-obligation instigated a proactive and defensive move toward secession. The movement for a City of Stonecrest, for instance, ostensibly offered a response to the economic implications (mediated by the cityhood movement) of racial segregation and uneven development—though only for a relatively well-off Black portion of South DeKalb—by promising to attract investment and increase wealth within its boundaries. Stonecrest, in the eyes of its boosters, was to be a competitive city with a recognizable brand and a business-friendly outlook that would provide the necessary conditions for increasing home values and building Black wealth. The movement for a City of Stonecrest was thus, in many respects, consonant with more historical visions for the Black Mecca in Atlanta and beyond (Hankins & Holloway, 2020). Stonecrest would compete for the businesses and commercial developments that historically have chosen White North DeKalb locations, and it would soon be spoken in the same breath as Brookhaven, Dunwoody, Decatur, and other suburban nodes of material wealth within DeKalb County and Metro Atlanta more broadly. One supporter of Stonecrest implored us to

> think about what's happening here. Look at Dunwoody and Brookhaven … They are their own solid city, with their solid brand. You don't see them going out saying hey, come to north DeKalb. (laughs). No, they say, hey, come to Dunwoody, come to Brookhaven. They have a—they have a solid identity.

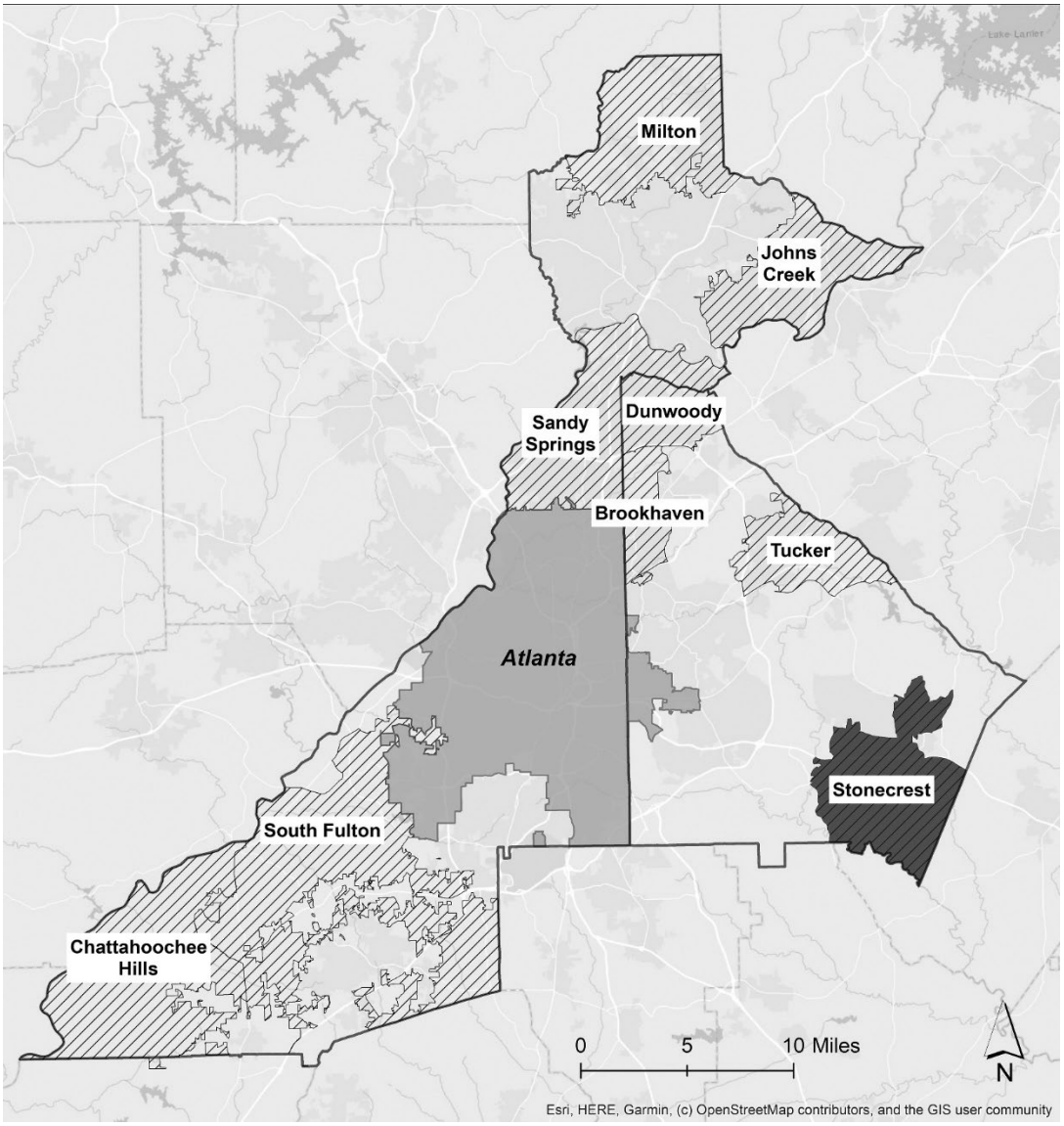

Figure 1 [A.1]. New cities in Fulton and DeKalb County, Georgia, 2005–2017

Another Stonecrest supporter argued that potential investors and commercial entities would pass over areas simply because they lacked a coherent city-focused brand: "Sandy Springs is in Fulton County. You never hear of them going, hey, you know, come to Fulton County. It's all city related." A majority of those within the proposed boundaries of Stonecrest were sufficiently convinced by this narrative—its incorporation suggests the

argument was effective—and the city was incorporated by referendum, leaving the rest of South DeKalb behind.

The Black Mecca? Aspiration and Impossibility

In the opening decades of the 20th century, millions of Black rural Southerners escaped the oppressive clutches of Jim Crow by moving to the urban North, inspiring a new optimism for Black people. Many believed these migrants would be afforded their first real opportunity since the abolition of slavery—and the subsequent abandonment of Reconstruction—to become full citizens by establishing their own communities where Black arts and culture could flourish (Hunter & Robinson, 2018; Rhodes-Pitts, 2011). In the 1920s, no place embodied this potential more than Harlem. “In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination,” wrote Alain Locke in 1925 (1925a, p. 630). As “a race capital,” it would foster “the resurgence of a race” and give birth to “the New Negro” (p. 630). In short, Locke maintained that Harlem as a race capital could propel Black people one step closer to “full initiation into American democracy” (1925b, p. 634). He called this place, this idea, the “Mecca of the New Negro.”

By the mid-20th century, it had become clear that the aspirations Locke had for Harlem were not going to be realized entirely as he had imagined. In 1951, Langston Hughes incisively captured this divergence in his aptly-titled poem, “Harlem,” asking the famous question: “What happens to a dream deferred?” Scholarly appraisals soon followed. Perhaps most notably, Kenneth Clark (1965) chronicled the intense social and economic hardships that had befallen Harlem in his pivotal book, *Dark Ghetto*. The book has been rightly criticized for its misguided focus on cultural “pathologies” that painted a frightful

image of Black urban life that was all too easily leveraged against Black people and that overlooked the enduring personal and cultural significance of Harlem to its residents and to Black Americans generally (e.g., Duneier, 2016; Hunter & Robinson, 2018; Shelby, 2016). Yet, in his somber account, Clark depicts a harrowing contrast to Locke's optimism. Whatever Harlem was in this moment, it was not quite the place envisioned by Locke.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the national civil rights movement, there was a renewed optimism. A newly stated federal commitment to racial equality before the law signified another emerging era of possibility for African Americans, a significant step toward "full initiation." The geographical imagination of Black opportunity in this new era was no longer placed in cities of the industrial North, however. Along with much of the emerging "post-industrial" economy, it was traveling South, especially to Atlanta.

Once heralded by W.E.B. DuBois (1903/1994, p. 47) as the "City of a Hundred Hills," Atlanta's boosters had rebranded it as "The City Too Busy to Hate" in the 1960s. Then, in 1971, *Ebony* magazine gave it yet another name. Atlanta was now the "Black Mecca of the South" (Garland, 1971). The article begins (p. 152):

> Some say it's the place where Black dreams are most likely to come true, that in Atlanta Black folks have more, live better, accomplish more and deal with whites more effectively than they do anywhere else in the South—or North.
>
> There is some evidence to support this boastful claim, for Atlanta, Ga., exemplary symbol of the "New South," is a promising but yet uncertain emerging giant that

> dangles before America the possibility of peaceful—and profitable—racial co-existence.

The article's author, Phyl Garland, exhibited a similar optimism about Atlanta's fortunes to that which Locke had expressed for Harlem's. There was, however, one crucial difference. Rather than highlighting arts and culture, as Locke had done, Garland championed Black enterprise, education, and political clout, presenting profiles of Atlanta's most prominent Black businessmen, companies, colleges, and politicians. In contrast to this initial optimism, however, Garland's piece closes on a more cautious note, reminding readers that despite the successes of Atlanta's Black elites, its Black population remained deeply divided along class lines. He quotes Atlanta-based civil rights leader turned Georgia politician Julian Bond, "This is the best place in the United States for a Black if you're middle-class and have a college degree, but if you're poor, it's just like Birmingham, Jackson or any other place" (p. 157).

Nearly 50 years since the *Ebony* article first appeared in print, Atlanta's reputation as "Black Mecca" endures (Hobson, 2017). One recent intervention has extended the label retroactively to apply to the city as it existed near the turn of the 20th century. This was a particularly meaningful moment in Atlanta's history, as elite Black colleges such as Atlanta University and Clark, Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Spelman Colleges were gaining national and international acclaim and lucrative Black enterprises were taking off (Hobson, 2017). By the 1920s, famed Black-owned businesses such as the Atlanta Life Insurance Company and Citizens Trust Bank were opening offices on Auburn Avenue, which was then recognized as "the richest Negro street in the world" (Hughes, 1956).

Yet focusing on the business and political successes of Atlanta's Black urban elite misses a key geographic feature of the Black Mecca. As Hankins and Holloway (2020) argue, Atlanta's Black Mecca has primarily been a *suburban* phenomenon. For instance, though Citizens Trust Bank—a symbol of Atlanta's Black entrepreneurialism and wealth since it opened in 1921—was located near downtown, it was financed largely through issuing home loans to middle-class Black Atlantans moving to the city's suburbanizing western edge. With Citizens Trust mortgages, upwardly mobile Black residents frequently purchased newly built single-family homes constructed by Black developers—Heman Perry, most famously—specifically for the Black middle class in "Negro expansion areas" (Hankins & Holloway, 2020; Wiese, 2004). These spaces, which were often outside Atlanta's pre-1951 city limits, were produced from political negotiations between Atlanta's White and Black civic leaders. The former primarily hoped that designating select parcel groupings for Black home construction would ensure the perpetuation of residential segregation, while the latter primarily sought to improve the quality of Black neighborhoods, albeit on the basis of racial separation. Hence, the production of Atlanta's Black Mecca was, from early on, contingent on its accommodating Whites' insistence on racial segregation.

Building "self-contained Black neighborhoods on the developing edge of town," argues Wiese (2004, pp. 176–177), "became the blueprint for Black housing efforts for the rest of the century." By the time *Ebony* declared Atlanta as Black Mecca in 1971, most of the Black upper and middle classes had moved to upscale but racially segregated, postwar subdivisions on the city's western edge and beyond, in communities such as Collier Heights, Peyton Forest, and Cascade Heights. In the following decades, modest gains in

Black wealth and a steady growth in Black homeownership spurred further Black suburbanization so that by 1990, the number of Black Metro Atlantans living outside the City of Atlanta surpassed those in it (Hankins & Holloway, 2020; Hartshorne & Ihlanfeldt, 1993). By 2000, suburban DeKalb County—the home of Stonecrest—had become the second richest majority-Black county in the United States, and it had an especially high Black homeownership rate of 56%.[1] As Atlanta's commercial and residential real estate continued to suburbanize, so did its Black Mecca.

If it was the Great Depression and subsequent rounds of devaluation that clouded Alain Locke's rosy vision for Harlem, then it was the foreclosure crisis of 2007–2008 that "explode[ed] the myth" (Bullard et al., 2010) of broad racial uplift in Metro Atlanta. Atlanta's middle-class Black suburbs in Fulton and DeKalb Counties, which had been some of the most rapidly growing areas in Metro Atlanta in the 1990s and early 2000s, suffered the greatest economic loss in the region during the Great Recession (Bullard et al., 2010; Markley et al., 2020; Raymond et al., 2016). It is also in these neighborhoods where housing prices and homeownership have been slowest to recover.

Figure 2 below illustrates Atlanta's uneven home price recovery. It shows mean home prices for each year from 2000 until 2016 in five different census tract groupings in DeKalb County.[2] Figure 3 shows where these tracts are located within DeKalb relative to Stonecrest. Descriptive statistics for these groupings are presented in Table 1. Tracts are designated as either "White" or "Black" if at least 50% of their respective populations are White or Black. Following previous studies (Lacy, 2012; Markley et al., 2020), middle-income (MI) tracts have median household incomes that are between 80% ($42,705.60) and 120% ($64,058.40) of DeKalb County's median tract ($53,382). High-income (HI)

White neighborhoods have median incomes above $64,058.40, and low-income (LI) Black neighborhoods have median incomes below $42,705.60. “Other” includes the remaining tracts, which are more racially diverse than the other four tract types, often having larger Hispanic populations (see Table 1).

Table 1 [AT.1]. Descriptive statistics for DeKalb tract groupings.

Tract type	n	Median Household Income	% Black	% White	% Hispanic	% Home-ownership	% Poverty
HI White	36	$93,526	11.7	74.4	5.1	70.1	9.0
MI White	8	$58,078	12.6	66.2	7.6	52.0	16.8
MI Black	36	$54,205	85.4	8.6	2.8	71.5	15.0
LI Black	34	$35,057	80.1	11.4	3.4	44.0	29.1
Other	27	$44,669	20.3	29.5	32.8	34.3	27.1

*All data from 2012–2016 American Community Survey (ACS).

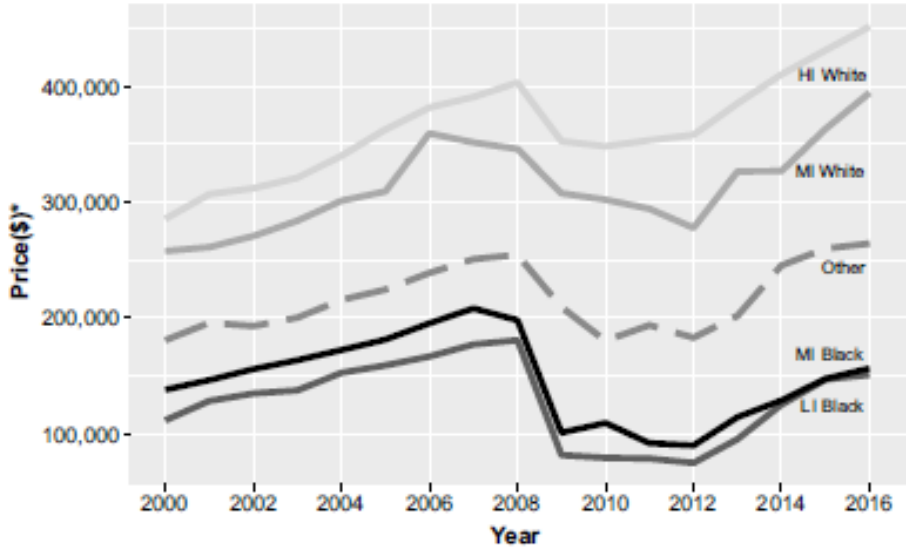

Figure 2 [A.2]. Home sale prices by race and income in DeKalb County, Georgia, 2000-2016. *Prices are normalized by home square footage and reflect the price at the time of sale.

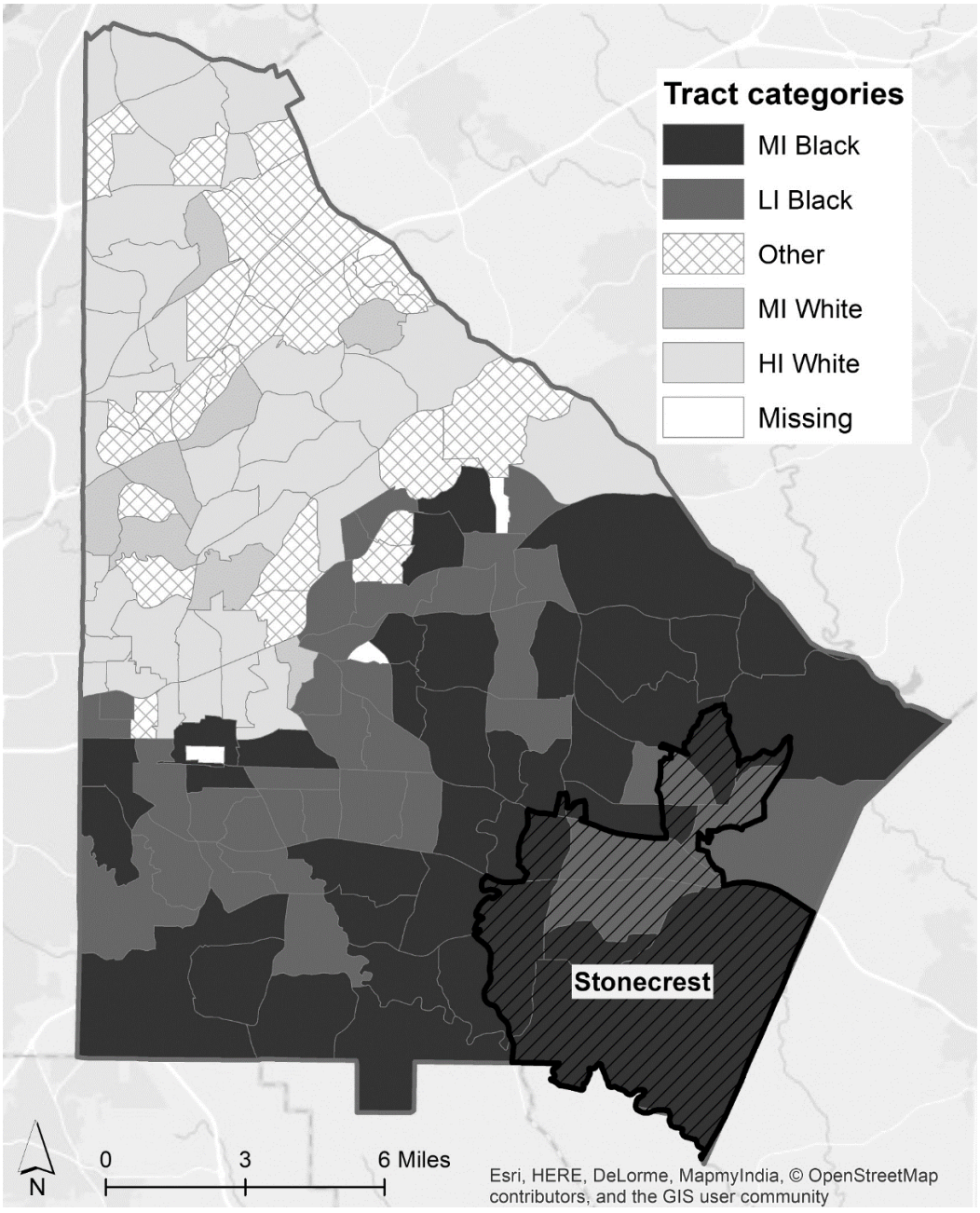

Figure 3 [A.3]. Race and income tract categories in DeKalb County, Georgia.

As Figure 2 starkly shows, home sale prices in White tracts have persisted at levels much higher than in Black tracts, even after controlling for square footage and separating tracts by income. In 2000, MI White tracts had home sale prices nearly $120,000 higher

than MI Black tracts. Though this gap widened in the lead-up to the subprime lending crisis, home prices were at least climbing at similar rates. The crisis changed that dramatically. Homes in both MI and LI Black neighborhoods lost over half their value between 2007 and 2009. And by 2016, though prices in HI White, MI White, and Other tracts had far surpassed their pre-crisis levels, homes in both MI and LI Black tracts were selling at only around 75 and 85%, respectively, of their 2007 prices.

The discrepancy between home prices in MI Black tracts and the other non-Black tracts is particularly telling. According to Table 1, MI Black tracts have the highest homeownership rates out of any of the neighborhood groupings, and they have the second lowest poverty rates, trailing only HI White tracts. MI Black tracts have higher median incomes than Other tracts, and yet their home prices have remained perpetually lower. The similar home price trends displayed by MI and LI Black tracts suggest that the racial composition of an area impacts home prices more than the incomes of that area's residents. Thus, as others have argued in various contexts (e.g., Charles, 2006; Flippen, 2004; Lipsitz, 2011; Markley et al., 2020), the ability of Black residents living in Black middle-income areas such as Stonecrest to accumulate wealth through residential property ownership is tempered by the area's being racialized as Black. Put differently, the racially uneven geographies of home prices and capital flows more generally inform—indeed are the very conditions of possibility for—the Stonecrest cityhood movement.

We are left to wonder, then: whither the Black Mecca? Locke's vision for Harlem as the "Mecca for the New Negro" began to fade almost from the very moment of its initial articulation. As Clark's (1965) study of Harlem revealed, Locke's optimism was not betrayed. Rather, his hopeful vision that Harlem could facilitate the "full initiation" of

Black people into a society that exists, in the words of Manning Marable (1983, p. 2), "not to develop, but to *underdevelop* Black people" (emphasis in original) *could never have* come to fruition. Harlem's residents may have been geographically isolated from White society—an isolation that residents, in many respects, successfully took advantage of—but they were never free from the influence of its institutions. This fact is poignantly illustrated by the decades of redlining, urban renewal, and, eventually, gentrification imposed on Harlem, which we collectively diagnose as features of White democracy (Olson, 2004).

White democracy and the Black Mecca

Stonecrest's incorporation is a project that city leaders have argued will counteract the racial unevenness in housing values and commercial development detailed above. Cityhood in this instance is understood as an instrument by which Black households can accumulate wealth and ensure the material security and political power so long denied them. We argue that this is a (perhaps tactical, perhaps ideological) misreading of the racialized history of housing and property, a misreading of the property-centric history of American liberal democracy, and a misreading, indeed an implicit denial, of the White supremacist history of the technology of cityhood. Moving beyond White democracy as the terrain for struggle requires imagining possibilities for Black liberation and community material security which capture the spirit of the original Black Mecca of Harlem, but which—at the same time—consciously name and reject the paradigms and structures that have consistently hampered the project. Consequently, we aim in this section to produce a

reading which runs radically counter to the popular historiography of the Stonecrest cityhood narrative and challenges its underlying presuppositions.

We offer this reading in an attempt to further uncover, set into motion, and make meaning of the various, unexpected, and networked contradictions that mark the movement for Black cities in Atlanta. In thinking critically about emancipation, in moving beyond the hegemonic logics of racial capitalism, thinking otherwise is the whole point. Thus, we purposefully use Olson's (2004) concepts to press the surface-level narratives of Black cityhood supporters, feeling for their symptomatic (Althusser et al., 2016) absences and elisions, and thus for the thin places from which radical change might rush forth.

Curiously, given the optimistic ahistoricism of the movement for cityhood, leaders of Stonecrest are quite forthcoming on the racial politics that generated the contemporary geography of the area. One supporter details this history[3]:

> The Stonecrest area was planned out in the late 80s, early 90s, as a mirror development to the Perimeter area, okay? The land is zoned that way, every—the development is laid out that way. However, you know, and this is just me, I believe that when they saw the demographic of the people who were moving into that area, they decided that it was no longer a feasible investment for the county, that resources should be allocated and focused elsewhere. The people who came were primarily African American, worked in different areas of the county but still highly educated, well-paid, upper middle class and wealthy people moving into the area. However, they felt that what they wanted to do with the area was not going to be able to happen with the demographic that was moving there.

There is, implicit here, quite a devastating critique of racial capitalism and White democracy as twin drivers of segregated geographies in Atlanta. Yet Jason Lary, the current mayor of the City of Stonecrest and its central champion pre-incorporation, has argued that the city's incorporation was necessary, as

> we don't have an identity to be able to draw people out to southeast DeKalb. We can't—you know, our selling point can't be, hey, look at us over here in southeast DeKalb County unincorporated. No, no. It has to have a solid brand attached to it. Hey, come and look at us, move your business to the city of Stonecrest, where we are a solid foundation of intelligent citizens and available land and good commercial space. That's selling. That's branding. That's what Dunwoody and those guys have that we don't.

This view is shared across Stonecrest's body of support. The difference for Lary and his fellow supporters between "those guys"—i.e. the earlier, Whiter cities that followed in the wake of Sandy Springs—and "us" is always one of branding in the increasingly-competitive market of intrametropolitan competition (Harvey, 1989). But in this "problem closure" (Guthman, 2011), Lary's narrative precludes other avenues of explication and contestation, and quashes any forms of radicality latent in their own telling of Stonecrest's history.

We contend that such narrative foreclosures on the part of Stonecrest supporters elide, among other relevant considerations, the insidious, space-making power that colorblind racial bipolarity wields in the American city. The idea of racial bipolarity in Olson's (2004) work reasserts the primacy of historically inflected, mutually constituted categories of White and Black. White signifies not-Black, and Black signifies not-White. One can see

the intuitive germs of this construction in the history offered before Lary's comments above.

Racial bipolarity, Olson argues, is particularly important in response to popular narratives around increasing diversity and multiculturalism beyond White and Black, which some offer as evidence for the declining significance of White/Black racial antagonism. We can use this bipolarity to offer a counter-interpretation that interrupts the finality of the narrative above. Olson borrows from Du Bois to think through White and Black "worlds," and to theorize the dialectical (bipolar) struggle between these oppositional categories of political (i.e. not biological, cultural, etc.) power. Whiteness, in Olson's reading, is thus rendered a set of power relations and a hegemonic mechanism for ordering the world. Perhaps what White cities such as Dunwoody offer that Stonecrest lacks is not branding *per se*, but rather the mark of normative Whiteness that is not-Blackness. In other words, what White areas offer is largely the negation of Black presence—it is this oppositional signification on which their brand relies (for a deeper discussion of this opposition, see Markley et al., 2020).

In insisting on the centrality of branding—as opposed to social relations, history, ideology, and race/racism—as accounting for recent uneven geographic development and thus as the solution to this unevenness, Stonecrest supporters obscure the broader effects of racial bipolarity and advance a colorblind reading of the politics of cityhood. This colorblindness, according to Olson, originates from state attempts to ensure "equality" under the law regardless of race, a project originally oriented toward the full inclusion of Black people into society post-Emancipation. Other scholars suggest less benign intentions, pointing instead to legal precedents and post-Reconstruction political reforms

in the Deep South and nationally, which specifically operationalized colorblindness as a means of sanctioning racial inequality under doctrines of separation (see, for example, Foner, 2019; Kousser, 1999). The result, in any event, has been a full divorce of racial categories from historical power relations and an understanding of racism limited almost exclusively to individual prejudice. It is a "means of perpetuating privilege" by rendering nonpolitical and defining away "the power relations inherent in race" (Olson, 2004, p. 105). Thus, Whiteness is made apolitical, ahistorical, impotent, and banal, resigned to a before-time to which we no longer have, nor should we seek, meaningful access.

The success of the colorblind ideal is evident in our interviews, as little mention is made of the racial politics which allowed areas like Dunwoody to accumulate such wealth from the wages of Whiteness. Indeed, this possibility is explicitly denied by both White and Black cityhood supporters. In this discourse, racism, to the extent that it exists, is located in the individual person, is unnecessarily divisive, and should have no real purchase in debates over space. A White cityhood supporter argued that

> it is a no-win situation when you talk about [race]. It troubles me to no end, even as a Republican, troubles me to no end when somebody tosses that around loosely. If somebody is a racist—David Duke, right? Clearly. You know? Or hey, if I'm saying something not appropriate, I'm not the smartest guy in the world. Educate me. But don't, like, throw these awful labels at people when they might not even be smart enough to know they are being a racist person.

Another White cityhood supporter echoed this claim:

> The United States has grown. I don't think all those people are necessarily racist. And, you know, this whole issue with political correctness has obfuscated, you

> know, this whole discussion. It's not that they're all racist, it's that they have real concerns

A Black supporter of Stonecrest agreed that the issues of race are largely a distraction from the work that needs to be done to rectify uneven development:

> We have been left out of the economic engine, and the only way to be able to fix that, in my view, is to form our own city, concentrate on our own economic development department, draw business to our corridor, and improve our own living conditions. We don't need any handouts, not looking for any … I don't think that it's an issue of [the county] excluding us, it's an issue of them not having the resources to give to everybody. And what has happened is central and north DeKalb has thrived, southeast DeKalb is suffering. And if you look at their economic development department, their budget can't cover the size of several hundred thousand constituents to be able to draw business for all of us.

The solution, again, in the eyes of our Stonecrest supporter, is not to address directly the uneven racial geographies of Atlanta as products of accumulated racial privilege and White democracy, but, rather, to constrain the issue to the realm of colorblind economics and urban development. Conversely, and interestingly from the standpoint of our argument herein, one of the few Black opponents of Black cityhood offers a very different take on this history:

> I would say—I would say that normally throughout the United States, you have areas where it's predominantly black, you have less economic development and that's a trend nationwide. Why is that? In my opinion, it has to do with race … I oppose [Stonecrest] because of the fact that my vision, my vision is DeKalb County

> working together, okay? That's my vision … the common cause is to enhance and to change the quality of life in DeKalb County as a whole.

Not only is the claim made here more politically explicit and historically compelling in its analysis of uneven development, but also the resultant vision for the future of the county that rests on a politics of Black solidarity and not on the further balkanization of unincorporated geographies.

White democracy holds within itself both racial bipolarity and colorblindness, alongside myriad other regimes and ideologies which contradict and intersect one another. The concept itself is a contradiction, as "racial oppression makes full democracy impossible, but … has also made American democracy possible" (Olson, 2004, p. xv). Racism and American democracy are inseparable, historically and institutionally, and thus the project of racial equality as articulated through American democratic ends is always already compromised by White democracy. True democracy (what Olson calls abolition democracy) must not only be capable of naming its target, but of truly rupturing the White democratic consensus.

Race, Olson insists, is not "something one is," but rather "something one does" (2004, p. xviii). "The problem with limiting our understanding of race to personal identity," he continues, "is not that it leads to a politics of resentment, victimization, or balkanization, as many critics of identity politics argue, but that it leads to very little politics at all" (p. 6). Our Stonecrest supporters are counting on an economic identity to overcome a racial one—despite the recognition that the early plans for Stonecrest as a geographic twin to (Whiter, wealthier) Perimeter failed to do so. The truly democratic project (a vision for the common cause, if we wish to borrow the language of the Stonecrest opponent above), rather, is to

explode the simplifications and elisions above, to move beyond identity and inclusion to a radical abolition democracy particularly attuned to power and history. It is not, as Locke would have it, a matter of "full initiation into American democracy" but a reconfiguration of democracy *per se.*

Conclusion: Democracy Beyond the Black Mecca

One year after the incorporation of Stonecrest in 2017, the online retailer and corporate giant Amazon announced its intentions to build a second headquarters somewhere in the United States. The announcement set off a veritable frenzy—the urban economic neoliberalization of the past several decades had primed and disciplined municipalities for just such an opportunity. Major cities like Atlanta, Boston, and Chicago assembled bid packages including various tax considerations and other financial concessions in attempts to lure the lucrative Amazon development and all it would bring with it. Having just successfully incorporated at least partially on the promise of producing uplift by attracting major developments, the City of Stonecrest threw its hat into the ring as well, offering to carve off part of the new city to form yet another new city. In a move almost too on-the-nose to be believable, this new city would be called "Amazon, Georgia," and, subverting democracy altogether, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos would be appointed mayor (Niesse, 2017). Supporters of Stonecrest told us in 2016 that they hoped the new city would provide "a better place to be." Jason Lary, the current mayor of Stonecrest and its main cheerleader during the cityhood process, described his vision in December of 2017: "It will be a corporate city like no other place in the country" (Darnell, 2017). Lary reads these two visions as identical—we contend that the gap between them is all but unbridgeable.

Putting aside whether this bid had any chance at all of succeeding—and subsequent announcements from Amazon itself, along with decades of urban history, suggest it never did—the idea that Black equality would be ultimately realized as an expression of vulgar, neoliberal Black capitalism (see, e.g., Baradaran, 2017) beggars belief. While a Black middle-class city such as Stonecrest choosing to put a bulwark against further marginalization does, at least nominally, acknowledge the legacies of racialized capitalism and uneven development, our interviews and critical readings show the aim of Stonecrest's boosters has been to replace conspicuous Blackness with colorblind corporateness, rejecting solidarity with other Black communities in the county in favor of chance for a firmer handhold in the crags of White democracy. Thus, not only does Black cityhood in Atlanta fail to challenge racial power structures, it also reifies the exclusionary and extractive system of racial capitalism that create and exacerbate inequality in Black communities.

And yet—perhaps—there is some hope for Black cities in the South if we broaden our field of vision. We might look toward Jackson, Mississippi and the democratic worker cooperatives that mark Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba's radical vision, a vision of how a Black city might counter the pressures of structural racism and neoliberal capitalism and begin to build something radically different (Guttenplan, 2017). Closer to Stonecrest, socialist South Fulton councilman khalid has led a race-forward (his website sums up this approach as "Black on Purpose") campaign to turn the new city into a "real-life Wakanda that empowers its citizens' success" (Councilman khalid, 2020). "Capitalism," he has argued, "won't save black people" for many of the reasons we have articulated in the foregoing pages (Heins, 2020). And while South Fulton cannot overthrow the dictates of

racial capitalism on its own, it has had some tangible success in realizing khalid's vision: South Fulton has been successful in "raising the minimum wage of city employees to $15 per hour, decriminalizing marijuana, reducing the police budget, making Election Day a holiday, abolishing Columbus Day and passing a resolution to oppose Immigrant detention centers" (Kamau, 2020). Time will tell what these struggles for Black power can produce—the projects likely depend on their ability, and that of their leaders, to meaningfully resist the edicts of racialized capital and White democracy that are so historically potent.

If we hope to move toward a more urgent and incisive politics around cityhood, then we must consider history and geography outside of the imagineered and strategically forgotten social canon of Atlanta. Remembering is thus a deeply political act. We must confront the historical reality of space in Atlanta: it has been and continues to be produced along racial lines. Anything that takes place on this landscape engages this history, willfully or otherwise. Places shift, and neighborhoods turn over, but the processes that have differentiated space in particular ways are much harder to halt or redirect.

If we wish to combat White democracy, we should condemn cities and other political configurations that invest in racialized and historically-accrued material and political advantage, such as Sandy Springs. And we should celebrate self-determination of Black communities like Stonecrest in a metropolitan area that has for so long denied that basic right, even as we note the limitations and contradictions of these movements. But we must also search for the unasked questions, the buried histories, the forgotten struggles, the impossibilities in the stories we think we know about Atlanta and excavate the kernels of alternative realities to build alternative democratic futures that these stories obscure or preclude. As Olson (2004, p. xvi) insists, the lingering question

> is not just democracy for whom but what kind of democracy, not just who is to be made equal but what kind of equality, not just who is to be free but what kind of freedom. Democracy is not a refuge that exists above the fray of interminable political conflict. It is a rough-and-tumble product of such conflict.

We must, he concludes, fundamentally "reimagine democracy and its radical potential" (p. xvii). So long as Black emancipation relies on White democracy, the latter will consume the former, and a true abolition democracy will remain an incomplete promise. The master's house still stands. If we wish for equity in Atlanta, we must name every brick, and pull the walls out piece by piece.

APPENDIX B

~~METHODS~~

This dissertation broadly tracks the critical race theorist Howard Winant (2004) in its commitment to the idea that diagnosing and opposing the extractive and exclusionary workings of race requires a refusal to collapse those overdetermined systems and formations which reproduce power and difference (Gilmore, 2002) into either an undifferentiated, ahistorical totality or a series of unique historical curiosities. Cornel West (1987, para. 27) characterizes such an orientation to the theorizing of race in society as 'radically historical,' allowing us to confront "more candidly the myriad of effects and consequences (intended and unintended, conscious and unconscious) of power-laden and conflict-ridden social practices…the complex confluence of human bodies, traditions and institutions."

As a consequence of secession democracy's 'complex confluence' of social practices and institutions, the empirical assemblage within which this project takes form is vast, comprising many dozens of hours of interview data; hundreds of pages of text, including mailers, economic studies, testimony, news coverage, and press releases; and innumerable images, notes, and other artifactual ephemera. This archive covers both the larger secession movement since 2005 and the roughly half dozen individual cityhood efforts that I have closely studied and written about in the last several years. In particular, three cases—beyond the titular Buckhead movement—percolate throughout this work as precedents, referents, foils. The Cities of Sandy Springs and Stonecrest, along with the

failed-but-perhaps-not-yet-dead City of LaVista Hills, will continue to reappear throughout. With respect to the case of the Buckhead movement that forms the empirical core of the present work, I have spent the last two years accumulating and curating conversations, texts, and other artifacts from supporters, opponents, and other interested observers.

There are several actors, groups, and institutions arrayed behind and against the emergent Buckhead City movement which are central to this work. Most prominent is the Buckhead City Committee (BCC), the group led by political fundraiser and entrepreneur Bill White, which is calling the de-annexation charge. According to their own literature (2021), the group seeks to "improve the safety in our streets, ensure that our city services align with our tax dollars, build infrastructure and preserve our parklike setting through keeping tree canopy and zoning." These steps are necessary, as the "City of Atlanta has displayed a pattern of neglect and disrespect towards our community which has caused crime to increase at an alarming rate, our infrastructure to crumble, and many residents to flee the area."

In direct opposition to the Buckhead City movement stands the Committee for a United Atlanta (CUA), a volunteer organization headed by two attorneys, which has been contending with the Buckhead City Committee largely on procedural/public policy grounds. Of note, one of the attorneys who is leading this effort, Ed Lindsey, helped to craft the initial Sandy Springs secession legislation during a prior career as a Republican state representative.

The largest institutional detractor of the Buckhead City movement is, of course, the City of Atlanta itself. The Office of the Mayor and the City Council are vocally opposed

to the Buckhead movement, as are many state-level politicians who represent Atlanta constituencies. There is, of course, a less formal opposition, though this is not particularly well-organized or consistent. There are, too, a few peripheral organizations within which cityhood debates are taking place or which have vested interest in the outcome of these debates in Buckhead. Most prominent among these, perhaps, is the Buckhead Council of Neighborhoods (BCN), a long-standing civic organization which has hosted fora on the Buckhead City question featuring BCC and its reluctant but committed opponents, CUA. There is also the more professionally inclined Buckhead Coalition (BC), which convenes "local leaders working to advance an inclusive vision of Buckhead, culturally rooted in the larger story of Greater Atlanta." The latter of the two entities is at least nominally opposed to cityhood for Buckhead, while the former remains conspicuously neutral under newly elected leadership.

I have conducted intensive interviews with representatives from BCC, CUA, BCN, BC, other municipal incorporation movements, and state and local government officials. As the Buckhead secession movement is ongoing, I have also availed myself of opportunities to attend meetings and events organized by these various groups, including BCN and BCC. There is, additionally, a growing body of publicly available video materials which I continue to archive. Bill White, for instance, takes every possible opportunity to evangelize on behalf of Buckhead City movement in both local and national media (Fox News has hosted him on multiple occasions; the right-wing commentary site Breitbart has featured him on their podcast). Furthermore, relevant state government hearings are, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, recorded and archived; I have transcribed several of these for use herein. Additionally, while I have maintained a bank of cityhood mailers, flyers,

and information sheets from my prior investigations, for this dissertation I have also assembled less formal and more recent articulations of the logics of white secessionism, especially as these logics continue to evolve in response to emergent threats (real or otherwise) to white hegemony. These include portions of campaign websites, popular media coverage of secession, as well as a whole constellation of snippets culled from social media pages where discussions around secession are increasingly hosted. Taken together, these artifacts comprise some 250,000 words of text and many dozens of images, videos, and audio recordings. In the following sections, I describe in some detail my approach to working with this archive.

Antiphenomenology & Hermeneutics of Suspicion

The urban theorist Tom Slater has put forth agnotology as a critical approach to understanding urban politics in the last several decades. Agnotology, for Slater (2014; 2021), is the study of the production of ignorance, of ignorance making (see also Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008; Schiebinger, 2004). Ignorance, here, is not an individual quality or incapacity; rather, it is "a strategic and pernicious ploy, an active construct" produced by political forces (Slater, 2014, p. X) amidst agonistic social struggle. Agnotology allows us—compels us—to think political ignorance differently: "we cannot assume that such ignorance is the outcome of simple oversight" (p. 962), and must instead be prepared to diagnose elisions or absences in discourse not as random negativity but as positive information about something.

Pat Blanchfield (2016) identifies apophasis as a different, though related, challenge for public knowledge—and offers a different approach to making sense of the obscure and

coded vernaculars of contemporary politics. Based in negative theology, apophasis is the rhetorical use of suggestion, contradiction, and negation to describe, however imperfectly, the nature and experience of God:

> Contradiction, beyond the senses and beyond sense itself, is the essence of apophatic speech; only through straining language to the outer limits of signification can we insinuate something that exceeds our all-too-human blinders. (Blanchfield, 2016)

Apophasis, in this case, is a manner of approaching the sublime from a limited human perspective. When, however, we run an apophatic proclivity through a reactionary, white authoritarianism, we are faced not with the "glow of love and tolerance" nor with an inarticulable aura of political possibility, but rather "a kind of sickly residue" (Blanchfield, 2016). Such a residue is most obvious in the apophatic utterances of Donald Trump: *I'm not going to call [Marco Rubio] a lightweight, because I think that's a derogatory term* or, in reference to Hillary Clinton, *I'm not going to say it. I refuse to say that I cannot stand her screaming into the microphone all the time…But I won't say it because we're not allowed to say it, right?* On the suggestion that Barack Obama was connected to Islamist terrorist groups: *you know, people can't believe it… there's something going on, it's inconceivable. Clinton was also complicit because you know why*.

Saying without saying, winking at transgression by refusing it in the same breath, denying imputed meaning and claiming victimhood: these became deeply familiar to all observers of Trump's presidency. But the problem with apophasis goes beyond mere utterances. Indeed, as Blanchfield (2016) charges in his concluding salvo,

> Trump's very vision of the future, his appeal, is, in a certain sense, apophatic: 'We can make this country so rich again.' 'I will make our military so big, powerful & strong that no one will mess with us.' Trump's sheer force of affirmation that America will be great obviates any need to explain how or why. All we need to do is accept him as a vessel for our fears, rage, and wants, to abandon 'political correctness,' and to embrace his promise of a world where taboo can finally be done away with once and for all, where forbidden hatreds and desires will finally be celebrated, and where the previously unspeakable made sayable. Use the right words, his words, the best words, and when we get there, it'll be so incredible, you just won't believe it.

Lest I leave the reader with the impression that this apophatic tendency in authoritarian politics is somehow limited to the personal idiosyncrasies of Donald J. Trump, let me offer some selections from Bill White. On Buckhead City solving the ostensible problem of crime: we're going to show the rest of the state how you hire 10,000 Cops and we're gonna get it done if you trust us and give us the right. In his opening remarks to the state legislature during a 2022 hearing, White dismissively welcomed, among other individuals and entities, the city of Atlanta's organized, taxpayer funded opposition. We will encounter throughout this dissertation similar throughlines, similar negations, deferrals, and conspiratorial invocations.[24]

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[24] It should be noted that apophatic speech is not essentially or necessarily reactionary; it can also be productive of a liberatory secular politics. Indeed, China Miéville (2019) challenges Marxists and others to overcome their anxiety that

> [w]ithout scientific exactitude…the world can be neither interpreted nor changed. The approach here allows that the opposite might be true. That there is to the social world something surplus to any reductive literalism, and that thus the supple deployment of apophatic techniques – because each usage must be ruthlessly evaluated – allows for greater precision.

Later, he argues that

Indeed, a great deal of the discourse on secession—particularly that which is reflected in the materials upon which this dissertation draws—sits somewhere between agnotology and apophasis. That is to say, it attempts either (and sometimes both) to obfuscate claims or to produce ignorance. At times, we see such tendencies realized in strategic denial or conscious misdirection; at others, we see it realized in the "sheer force of affirmation" which Blanchfield diagnoses as standing in for specification of why or how certain political goals are to be achieved. And sometimes, it is simply that certain discursive objects—freedom, for example—are so fundamental, so deeply rooted in lived experience and ideology, that elisions and contradictions go unnoticed, papered over by the internal coherence of the problematic which makes them legible in the first place.

This brief commentary on epistemic opacity through the figures of Slater and Blanchfield is not intended to suggest that secession activists and their opponents are necessarily, exclusively, or even intentionally duplicitous. I decided long ago that attempting to parse earnestness from expedience in such matters is a fool's errand; discourse and ideology construct subjects, overdetermine utterances to such a degree that establishing veracity in such an immediate sense is not only impossible but also not particularly useful.

Rather, I introduce these diverse thinkers here in order to orient the reader to the sort of analytical work that must be done, the sorts of challenges faced in interpreting and producing knowledge around secession. One must deal carefully, cunningly with that

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> the unsayable entwines the apocalyptic veil-rending of the world with the utopian horizon glimpsed through the rip; and the ripping itself, the messianic interruption, with the everyday from which it is emergent – the revolution being close, immanent even if not imminent.

If, as Walter Benjamin asserts, the redemptive moment may come in any instant, if it is thus unknowable, should not then the visions we articulate for the future attempt specification beyond the terms of the present world? Indeed, this sort of apophatic approach leaves open the possibility of becoming, of a revolution in the truest sense.

which does not wish fully to be known, that which imagines itself as beyond questioning. Paul Ricouer (1970) characterizes such work as embodying a hermeneutics of suspicion, a practice of reading and listening that refuses self-evident meaning in favor of locating other, less transparent, less self-conscious accounts and truths (see also Scott-Baumann, 2009). Felski (2011, para. 21), in her stirring defense of the particulars of Ricouer's orientation, suggests that suspicion in this hermeneutical sense "constitutes a muted affective state—a curiously non-emotional emotion of morally inflected mistrust—that overlaps with, and builds upon, the stance of detachment that characterises the stance of the professional or expert." Curiosity, mistrust, analytical detachment—these suggest precisely what I intend herein.

Given the foregoing, it will be of no surprise to the reader that the work at hand does not seek—as is the case with much contemporary, qualitative social scientific research—to produce a phenomenological account of its object. To be more precise, I am not concerned herein with representing subjective experiences or analyzing perceptions of relevant actors per se, nor with the deployment of a single framework of interpretation by which to assess such accounts. As Lather (1991) argues, the

> phenomenological paradigm is inadequate insofar as it is based upon an assumption of fully rational action. Sole reliance on the participants' perceptions of their situation is misguided because…ideological mystification may be present. A central challenge posed to the interpretive paradigm is the argument that reality is more than negotiated accounts—that we are both shaped by and shapers of our world. (p. 64)

Similarly, Adorno, in his critique of phenomenology, suggests that "the return to things requires that we reflect on our interaction with things under specific historical conditions" (Cook, 2018, p. 12). Indeed, phenomenological work

> is true as long as it accounts for the impossibility of its own beginnings and lets itself be driven at every stage by its inadequacy to the things themselves. It is, however, untrue in the pretension that success is at hand and that states-of-affairs would very simply correspond to its constructions and aporetic concepts. In other words, it is untrue according to the measure of scientificity which is its own. (Adorno, 2013, p.25)

Phenomenology must, in its concern and care for the first-order experience of social life—Husserl's things themselves—participate in the reification of the conditions by which such experience is possibilized. My project instead aims at demystification—not as from behind a veil, where careful phenomenological accounts might pierce the totalizing hegemony of brute data or scientistic accounts, but as against a railing suddenly disappeared, where that which we trusted would keep us from the edge is deprived of any solidity at all. A phenomenology of secession might give us rich insight into the experiences, affects, and actions of the various actors arrayed around the making of new cities, their deliberative practice, their subjective valuations; this project, instead seeks below, within, and against the phenomenon.

Postfoundational Inquiry

In the broadest sense, then, I enact a postfoundational approach (Butler, 2007; Marchart, 2008; Landau et al., 2021), which is to say that I am concerned with troubling the

constitutive foundational discourses, material practices, and geographies of secession democracy, those elements which undergird the 'complex confluence' above. I wish to be explicit: this postfoundational approach is not (only) an instantiation of what Mouffe (1993) and others call Postfoundational Discourse Analysis. Discourse is, indeed, central to the project in particular moments, but it does not exhaust the totality of the objects and processes that concern me herein. In his meditations on method in the social theory of race, Cornel West urges thinkers towards an approach which

> derives neither from mere deconstructions of the duplicitous and deceptive character of rhetorical strategies of logocentric discourses, nor from simple investigations into the operations of power of such discourses. Unlike Derrida and de Man, genealogical materialism [West's proposed method] does not rest content with a horizon of language. In contrast to Foucault and Said, I take the challenge of historical materialism with great seriousness.

West's readings of Derrida and Foucault are perhaps ungenerous here; nevertheless, his insistence that we explicitly deploy postfoundational approaches beyond the discursive is essential. Such an approach "preserves the materiality of multi-faceted structured social practices" while allowing for their interplay with a broader and deeper universe of "discursive operations and extra-discursive formations."

The valences of property, for instance, are more than discursive, as private property regimes produce the material ground for the new secession. Discourse does not constitute this material ground, rather it is social relations. This is not to reassert some vulgar determinism against a caricatured post-Marxist idealism; it is, rather, to draw attention to the extent to which the sort of de-centered totality of which Gibson-Graham (2006) and

others (see Cullehberg, 19999; Jay, 1984) write is no less a totality for being decentered. Discourse does not exhaust us here, as the contingent foundations of our worlds are not merely semantic, but neither must "the privileged material mode of production" necessarily be "located in the economic sphere" (West, 1987). Indeed, "decisive material modes of production at a given moment may be located in the cultural, political or even the psychic sphere" and, as these "spheres are interlocked and interlinked, each always has some weight in an adequate social and historical explanation" (Ibid).

Postfoundational geography, then, as Landau et al. (2021, p. 27) have convincingly argued, is an explicitly spatial approach to [un]grounding those "sedimentations of power and place" which structure these 'decisive material modes of production' and normalize inequality, exclusion, and difference. In addition to space itself, postfoundational geography directs us towards "laws, regulations, prohibitions, and routines" that both authorize and foreclose particular ideas, politics, ways of being in the world (Landau et al., 2021, p. 17). We are called to trace those contingent foundations (see Butler, 1992; Landau & Blakey, 2023) and the constituent "practices and institutions through which an order is created" (Mouffe, 2005, p.17).

Thinking with Theory as Postfoundational Praxis

Lucy Bailey (2019) approvingly cites Butler's postfoundational work to argue that method in "any research endeavor, including those commonly oriented toward social justice, might best be thought of as 'contingent foundations'; always temporary, shifting, and contestable 'authorizing grounds'; and conceptual springboards" (p. 98). Lather (2007, p. 27) similarly

insists that we keep research approaches "alive" and "loose," responsive rather than given. Indeed, critical social inquiry must resist what Bailey articulates as "methodological taxidermy" (2016, 2017), which is the "conceptualizing and freezing any given method, approach, or representation at the outset of a study" (2019, p. 92). Following Bailey's (2019, p. 91) insistence that method must be allowed to "crystalliz[e] in the specific space, time, moment, and trajectory of inquiry," the suspicious, postfoundational inclination of this work is underwritten in practice by the tenets of postqualitative inquiry (see Lather, 1991; St. Pierre, 2021, 2018).

Postqualitative theory challenges the basic axioms of conventional qualitative inquiry. It demonstrates how plug-and-play methodologies, validity exercises such as member checking, and fixed analytical techniques such as coding and thematic organization are only ever incomplete concessions to positivist hegemony, which interpretive (and, especially, postqualitative) work should instead seek to subvert. I have previously (2020, p. 3) characterized the postqualitative attitude, particularly within geographic inquiry, as seeking

> to provoke ever more radical questioning of the project of knowledge production writ large…Postqualitative inquiry attempts to synthesize various critiques of knowledge…and asks questions of the methodological instability that results from these critiques. What, for instance, counts as data, and how should—how can—one go about making meaning from its various forms? How can we speak of a method?

Thus, the heading of this section, which places method under erasure as something which is sufficiently necessary but necessarily insufficient; it serves a placeholding purpose in this work even as I continue to assert its limitations. For postqualitative theory insists, as

its most fundamental principle, that method—as a concept which can hold together, which can be thought, which directs our activities rather than becoming through them—is impossible.

There are several reasons why I remain tied to a postqualitative ethic, both for this project and as a broader epistemic commitment. The most basic is that I see postqualitative inquiry as the most honest and self-aware mode of practicing the form of social inquiry that has long been the singular purview of qualitative methods in the social sciences. Despite orthodox claims that such work necessarily interprets and represents the world in ways that are outside the hegemonic assumptions of what we might call scientistic inquiry, vestigial practices and more fundamental assumptions about subjectivity, theory, and data continue to tie qualitative inquiry to the positivisms it nominally resists. Postqualitative inquiry conspicuously unburdens us of these expectations and traditions of qualitative constraint without requiring that we commit to other forms of methodological discipline. Thus, I am able to collect and interpret interviews; assemble and read texts; write; play with language and form; and make conceptual and theoretical connections immanently and responsively.

In practice, all postqualitative inquiry refuses the necessity of conventional data management techniques (e.g., coding) and analytical regimes (e.g., narrative analysis) in favor of a more open-ended, theory-driven practice of inquiry (Jackson, 2017; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; Mazzei, 2014; Nordstrom, 2018; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Taguchi, 2012). Lather (1991, p. 55) characterizes this refusal thusly: “Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the

container into which the data must be poured." We can characterize this approach, in the broadest possible terms, as thinking with theory.

St. Pierre & Jackson (2014, p. 717) contend that "there is no recipe for this kind of analysis." Rather, thinking with theory is thus both experimental and context specific, and by definition cannot be articulated as a priori interpretive practice. As Jackson & Mazzei (2017, p. 1240) vigorously insist, "attempting to describe 'how' to think with theory—or what it 'is'—is ruined from the start." Thus, what I claim in doing this work in this way is not a new method but "the possibility of new questions and different ways of thinking research" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 14).