THE POLITICS OF URBAN SECESSION: RACE, CLASS, AND DEMOCRACY IN METRO
ATLANTA’S NEW CITYHOOD MOVEMENTS

by

COLEMAN ALEXANDER ALLUMS

(Under the Direction of Steven R. Holloway)

ABSTRACT

There is considerable and increasing public attention being paid to urban secession and the politics of cityhood in the American South. This project intervenes to explore the ways in which cityhood functions as a political project to maintain—and reproduce—racialized political and material power structures. I utilize qualitative methods to show how urban secession in Atlanta functions as a racial project in a context of organized forgetting, uniquely contoured by the neoliberal turn in American governance and policy at multiple scales in the last half century. Movements for urban secession reproduce racialized relations and spaces of power, consolidating the benefits of historical domination and marginalization and obscuring this reproduction as merely an artifact of apolitical economic reason, producing a fundamental misrecognition of the processes and histories that continue to shape space and politics in Atlanta.

INDEX WORDS: Race, Democracy, Neoliberalism, Whiteness, Forgetting, Politics of Space
THE POLITICS OF URBAN SECESSION: RACE, CLASS, AND DEMOCRACY IN METRO ATLANTA’S NEW CITYHOOD MOVEMENTS

by

COLEMAN ALEXANDER ALLUMS

B.S., Furman University, 2014

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2017
THE POLITICS OF URBAN SECESSION: RACE, CLASS, AND DEMOCRACY IN METRO ATLANTA’S NEW CITYHOOD MOVEMENTS

by

COLEMAN ALEXANDER ALLUMS

Major Professor: Steven R. Holloway
Committee: Hilda Kurtz
           Nikolas Heynen

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2017
DEDICATION

To Caroline and Carol, with gratitude and love.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like first to thank my advisor and friend, Steve Holloway, along with my wonderful committee members, Nik Heynen and Hilda Kurtz, for their guidance, patience, and warm collegiality throughout.

Others have assisted in the preparation of this work whether they know it or not. Scott Markley, Caroline Keegan, Shaina Poore, Madison Allums: you all have my sincere appreciation and affection.

I must also acknowledge Betsy Beymer-Farris, Paul Thomas, and Ron Friis for their constant support and encouragement. I wouldn’t be here without each of you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 CONCLUSION: A FINAL ANALYSIS</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>LaVista Hills mailer</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Atlanta’s new cities</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“We are not makers of history. We are made by history.”

-Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love

A Beginning
Sam Rosen (2017) in a recent essay in The Atlantic tackles Metro Atlanta’s “controversial”
cityhood movement. This movement (or, perhaps more precisely, this set of linked, opposed,
contradictory movements) is the increasingly contentious, post-2005 attempt to carve new cities
out of unincorporated land across several Atlanta counties. In the piece, Rosen gives a
compelling overview of some of the major themes and histories that inform cityhood, touching
on white flight, tax revolts, and racial politics, as well as governance, corruption, and self-
determination. It’s a solid foray by a leading national publication into a complex, ongoing
phenomenon and its key players, and an example of the considerable and increasing public
attention being paid to urban secession and the politics of cityhood in the South.

Where Rosen misses, it seems largely due to a lack of everyday familiarity with the Atlanta
area (he refers to the failed City of LaVista Hills as a “neighborhood” when LaVista Hills
doesn’t exist, and never has), a focus on the stories of people, and a preoccupation with intent,
rather than a focused, analytical incision into the corpus of cityhood. These incompletions and
artifacts of journalistic writing do not necessarily constitute faults in Rosen’s well-researched
and timely piece. Rather, these issues open up a productive space for conversation and complication of the ways in which we think about, write about, and do politics around cityhood.¹

As Connor (2015) notes in his work around the urban secession of Sandy Springs in Fulton County, the stakes of cityhood—political, material—are high. Of particular salience in the contemporary embodiment of the paradox are the millions of dollars in property tax revenues at play, as well as debates around the provision of social services. Additionally, as new cities take over certain functions from the county and begin to provide certain services in place of the county, the question of equitable political representation—and equal opportunity for material security—for minority communities inside of and arrayed around new cities takes on greater significance.

New Cities
The City of Sandy Springs was incorporated in 2005, after several decades of attempted annexations, incorporations, and other posturing around possible secession from Fulton County (the same county which contains the City of Atlanta). When Republicans gained control over both houses of the state legislature earlier in 2005—in addition to already holding the governorship—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. Prior to this procedural shift, newly incorporated cities were required to be at least 3 miles away from existing cities. The newly-seated conservative majority also changed procedural rules to allow the Sandy Springs cityhood question to be decided as a state bill. Previously, officials representing other areas of Fulton

¹ Portions of this chapter and other chapters of this thesis appear as a blog post on the Atlanta Studies Blog, under the title “Anti-Politics and the Impossibility of Race: Reflections on Urban Secession in Atlanta.” A full bibliographic entry can be found under the author’s name in the references section.
County had been able to effectively block any possible referendum on Sandy Springs cityhood before it was introduced to the larger assembly—they (I would argue rightly) feared the loss of revenue and the concentration of political economic power in an incorporated Sandy Springs.

Initial discussions around an incorporated Sandy Springs—which began decades before the City of Sandy Springs successfully incorporated, and coincided with an attempted hostile annexation into Atlanta—were explicitly ideological (that ideology being white supremacy). Rosen (2017) provides some useful historical context for this claim: “So, in 1965…Two spokesmen for Sandy Springs promised to ‘build up a city separate from Atlanta and your Negroes and forbid any Negroes to buy, or own, or live within our limits.’ Atlanta’s annexation plans had ‘forced this on us,’ they wrote, ‘and we will fight to the finish.’” These discussions evolved over several decades, such that by the time the eventual referendum was held 40 years later, concerns over tax equity, zoning control, and service provision had completely eclipsed any reasonable fears of annexation, and the vocal white supremacy had retreated into a more insidious colorblind racism.

With the political stumbling blocks effectively eliminated, the Sandy Springs referendum was held on June 21, 2005. As is normal under conventional interpretations of U.S. law, only those citizens who happen to fall within the proposed boundaries of a new city are permitted access to the referendum ballot in Georgia (meaning that the rest of Fulton County was forced to sit and watch as Sandy Springs took their ball and went home). The City of Sandy Springs was incorporated with over 90% of the vote. Sandy Springs was the first domino to fall, and its successful incorporation significantly lowered the political and programmatic barriers to entry for future cityhood initiatives in the State of Georgia. Sandy Springs not only demonstrated proof of concept, but also provided an ideological template (the why) and a strategic playbook (the
how) for future cityhood movements.

While over a decade has passed since 2005’s revolution, the ghost of Sandy Springs still haunts the urban landscape of Atlanta. Where previous research on cityhood (e.g. Hoch, 1984; Debbage, 2006) has suggested that new cities form largely in response to external threats (e.g. impending hostile annexation by an existing city), the example of Sandy Springs suggests that new cities may also operate as both a tool for and a socially-produced reification of politics and ideology in the form of a city. Subsequent cityhood movements, specifically including those detailed in later sections of this thesis, support this reading of the recent historical ledger.

Of particular prominence in cityhood debates—from Sandy Springs onward—are what seem to be fairly typical (of local politics) concerns over local control, taxation, commercial property, schools, place, and ‘community.’ Implicit in these debates, and of central concern to this project, are a matrix of important racial dynamics: DeKalb County (my research site just east of the City of Atlanta) is, not surprisingly, racially segregated—whites largely in the north and minority communities largely to the south—and the county government has, at least in recent history, been dominated by African-American politicians and bureaucrats. Furthermore, DeKalb County, like the City of Atlanta, other metro counties, and many other cities, is a spatial product of (and continues to be reproduced around legacies of) white flight, redlining, restrictive housing covenants, gentrification, and underdevelopment. Thus, many of these new cities—which are heralded by proponents as way to regain local control and to fashion a specific sort of community in a particular place—might also be seen as a colorblind fetishization of the form of the city, made possible by the obliteration of urban social history, and employed as a means to negotiate a racialized power dynamic in the larger county configuration towards the reification and ossification of historical, racialized spatial configurations.
A Thesis

My project intervenes among these cityhood movements, asking questions that largely go ignored in popular accounts such as the recent *Atlantic* piece and in conventional scholarly appraisals of cityhood. The overarching argument of this thesis is that urban secession in Atlanta functions as a racial project, uniquely contoured by the neoliberal turn in American governance and policy at multiple scales in the last half century, and as a neoliberal project, fixed in space through racial politics. Urban secession, I will show, is marked by increasingly differentiated, intra-local competition for highly-mobile capital; by a hegemonic, colorblind racial ideology; and by the particular socio-spatial histories of the city. The operation of the neoliberal racial project is obscured by purposeful ahistoricism (we might alternatively refer to this ahistoricism as *organized forgetting* or, in the specific Atlanta context, *imagineering*, both of which I describe and employ in later sections of this thesis), and by the obfuscation of the political under a technical or common-sense shibboleth (Du Bois, 1903).

The following chapters make transparent the articulations of structural processes, local histories, and divergent subjectivities around the question of urban secession. In the foregoing pages of this introduction, I have attempted to signal and highlight the (several, complementary, mutually constituted, cross-referential) lenses through which I analyze and attempt to explain the politics of urban secession in Atlanta. In this same spirit, the subsequent chapter outlines further my theoretical framework, which pulls from the social sciences generally, and particularly from urban geography, legal studies, and political theory. Here, I link the related concepts of *organized forgetting*, *imagineering*, and *anti-politics* with Du Bois’ conceptualization of the shibboleth in order to fully engage relevant literatures on neoliberalism and critical race studies.
A methodological chapter follows, wherein I situate my project in the social and material history of the city and its environs, such that ruptures and continuities in racial politics and democratic praxis, representation, and contestation help to contour the stories that follow. I then detail my approach to data collection and analysis in this project, and introduce my empirics.

An empirical and analytical chapter rounds out the thesis, dealing with my findings on the technical shibboleth of cityhood, colorblind racism, whiteness, neoliberalism, and the politics of urban secession writ large. I find that whiteness functions through an unholy alliance with colorblindness in the neoliberal practice of cityhood. One reproduces racialized relations and spaces of power, consolidating unto itself the benefits of historical domination and marginalization. The other obscures this reproduction as merely an artifact of neutral economics, producing a fundamental misrecognition of the processes and histories that undergird reality. Through anti-political processes of organized forgetting, histories of racial domination and exclusion are rendered opaque and abstracted into economistic presentism, such that contemporary inequities on Atlanta’s landscape—along with the new cityhood movements that seek to ossify inequitable relations—are viewed as simple products of apolitical geography and nothing else.

I find further that, in the case of emergent black cities, these processes of uneven development and reified difference are reproduced in a classist mode, such that the possibility of the Black Mecca as realized through cityhood relies on the marginalization of poorer black communities. As historically marginalized communities remain relatively underdeveloped and underresourced, as municipal reorganization limits employment opportunities and political power in minority communities, as black communities are forced to adopt what Audre Lorde calls the master’s tools in order to ensure they aren’t left (further) behind by the frenetic pace of
urban secession, we hear the same refrain from those practicing cityhood: *people live where they live.*

This project argues otherwise.
CHAPTER 2

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A History of the City, A history of the City

We have known Atlanta variously as the *Black Mecca, The Empire City of the South, The Gate City (of The South)*, and perhaps most famously *The City Too Busy to Hate*. While each of these invocations signals something important about the city, the project of representation is fraught and opaque: various names and associations, at different points in history, have both illuminated and obscured (sometimes concurrently) the reality of Atlanta. That reality, as Kruse (2005), Connor (2015), Stone (1989), and other critical scholars of Atlanta and its inner suburbs have deftly demonstrated, has, perhaps more often than not, been one of racial segregation, frequent boundary change, contradictory regime politics, and uneven development.

It seems necessary to recall that the City of Atlanta is and has long been both the producer and the product of an intentional, systematic, and internally-engineered propaganda regime. The corporate, political, and philanthropic elite of the city have attempted to cast Atlanta—and by extension, the metropolitan area—as a particular sort of historical protagonist in different moments, a particular sort of cultural and material force for different causes, and in so doing have not only constructed a specific, popular genealogy of the city, but have enabled and encouraged the reflection and projection of these ideal(ized) images and characterizations back onto the urban landscape (see, e.g., Connor, 2015; Rutheiser, 1996). Along with other projects, ideologies, materialities, and representations, this propaganda regime coheres into what Rutheiser (1996) refers to as *imagineering*, a term he borrows from Disney to call attention to
Atlanta’s amusement park feel: ahistorical, sanitized, and perhaps too good to be true. Part of working in, analyzing, knowing Atlanta, then, is understanding how and when to disaggregate fairytale from fact.

Spencer Hall (2017), in a retrospective piece on the recently-retired Georgia Dome—the longtime home of the Atlanta Falcons and host to numerous basketball championships and college football bowl games across the last several decades—presents a slightly different take on Atlanta. He reflects on his own experience of Atlanta’s architectural landscape, arriving at a critical conclusion, a truth that transcends the skyline it has helped to produce (emphasis mine):

On the way home, I remember passing the few super-distinct pieces of the Atlanta skyline: the Peachtree Westin that Dar Robinson jumped out of for a Burt Reynolds stunt, the UFO-shaped alien cake of Fulton County Stadium where the Braves played and where my dad would later take us to sit in empty seats and pick up fiendish sunburns, the Georgia Capital that always seemed completely out of place in all that retro-futurism and brutalist forestry around it. That’s the kind of place Atlanta was and still is — a place where the past is what seems unnecessary, not the future.

Thinking of the city this way, as a place where the past seems unnecessary, casts a particular sort of light onto the following pages, just as the not-quite-finished Mercedes-Benz Stadium casts a shadow on the soon-to-be-imploded Dome. What will we bury when the old stadium becomes a parking lot? What have we already lost?

This project cannot offer a comprehensive counter-history or a Zinnian people’s history of the City of Atlanta. While such an undertaking would undoubtedly prove invaluable to scholars of Atlanta, it is beyond the requirement and scope of this work and certainly overly ambitious to attempt such a thing at the present. Rather, in the chapters that follow, I seek to push back against some of the conceptual tropes, the socio-historical givens that dominate the ways in
which Atlanta is invoked in public discussion and remembered or considered in the collective public consciousness. Claims and arguments that I will make later in this thesis may seem discordant with Atlanta as myth, or—to borrow from Rutheiser (1996) and Giroux (2014)—with the imagineered or forgotten Atlanta. I will show that they are, however, entirely consistent with Atlanta per se.

**Urban Secession: A Framework**

A considerable portion of the literature on incorporation and annexation has focused, descriptively, around the linked questions of why, how, and in what contexts annexation and incorporation tend to proliferate (Edwards, 2011; Smith, 2011; Smith, 2012). These studies present macro-level (and generally statistical, or otherwise quantitative) analyses of the preconditions for local government boundary change at state, regional, or national scales. A significant portion of this literature suggests that incorporation might be understood as preemptive, particularly as a protectionist strategy in the face of an impending, hostile annexation (Burns, 1994; Hoch, 1984; Miller, 1981; Rigos & Spindler, 1991; Smith, 2011; Smith & Debbage, 2006). However, recent work by Waldner & Smith (2015) partially contradicts this, arguing instead that new cities may form 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. Rather than a reactionary, protectionist response to an impending annexation threat, Waldner & Smith argue that incorporation can be a political project with its own aims and commitments—this distinction is key for this project, both in terms of relevance and methodological considerations. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of the literature on urban secession remains largely descriptive, and elides questions of history, ideology, and
difference in the pursuit of a more thorough delineation of the banalities of urban secession.

The small body of critical geographic work on urban secession, particularly in California, provides a more incisive assessment of the politics of urban secession (Boudreau & Keil, 2001; Keil, 2000; 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).

Michan Connor’s (2015) exposition of the colorblind politics of Sandy Springs’ incorporation movement comes closest to a comprehensive critical analysis of urban secession in Atlanta. Connor discusses in detail the overtly racist histories of urban secession in the metropolitan area, and analyzes the ways in which colorblind racism is employed (juridically, politically) to create, justify, and maintain white cities. Connor is particularly concerned with the mechanisms by which new cities that clearly 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 act, but also the very explicitly racially-inflected roots of (at least
some of) the movements themselves. Connor’s is a truly critical contribution to the tradition of urban secession research and I utilize his work as a central launching point for my investigation. Nevertheless, even this work does not go far enough in explicating the (anti)politics of urban secession: it does not analyze movements for black cityhood at all, largely ignores the neoliberal, urban growth machine politics that pervade these movements, and focuses little on modes of political obfuscation beyond colorblindness.

Thus, this project is both a corrective to the more descriptive literature on urban secession, and an extension of the nascent critical work beginning to emerge from geography and related fields. A comprehensive analysis of the politics of urban secession must evaluate not only the mechanics of cityhood, but also the ways in which these mechanics operate to include and exclude, reproduce and rupture, as well as the ways in which these mechanics and their resultant spatial, political, economic, and social configurations and are justified and given form.

We cannot fully understand the politics of urban secession until we take seriously the politics of race. Race is a necessary avenue of analysis, but it is not sufficient to explain the politics of urban secession and of space. We must also engage the political economy of space, the neoliberal imperative at the core of the cityhood movement. Further, I argue, the politics of organized forgetting represent a critical, though unexplored element of a comprehensive investigation into urban secession. It is only in the synthesis of these perspectives that we can coherently analyze and begin to make sense of the political and ideological machinations that are the movement for urban secession.
Organized Forgetting, Imagineering, and Anti-Politics

The relevant question for LaVista Hills and Stonecrest (and, indeed, any other cityhood movement) is not whether they will or will not succeed (i.e. secede); rather, the relevant question relates to the politics of the city, to what is obscured by and subsumed under debates ostensibly over nothing more than legal incorporation of communities. Autopsies of the LaVista Hills movement (e.g. Hassinger, 2015; Wisenhunt, 2015b) and its failure have been offered from various perspectives, and these contain interesting facts and arguments about LaVista Hills and the politics of cityhood more generally. I am less interested in the proximate, electoral reasons that the City of LaVista Hills failed (or why others such as Sandy Springs—in 2005—succeeded). Rather, I am inclined to think more systematically and critically about the histories, spaces, and political projects that intersect with and are reproduced or disrupted by the creation of new techno-political, municipal arrangements.

Atlanta’s history of racially-motivated boundary work is at this point well-known and thoroughly documented (see, e.g., Connor, 2015; Kruse, 2006; Rutheiser, 1996; Stone, 1989). Kruse in particular details a number of the secessionist tactics of white flight in the Civil Rights era in the Atlanta metro area. Connor gives an exhaustive related account of the racialized spaces of secessionist politics around the City of Atlanta from the post-war period until the present.

Policing the boundaries of racial settlement has long defined Atlanta’s political culture (Bayor, 1996, p. 44). But this exclusionary impulse has only been one aspect of the history of race in Atlanta. The issue of power in local government has also sparked racial conflict since the 1949 Atlanta municipal elections, in which a disciplined black bloc vote enabled Mayor William B. Hartsfield’s bid for reelection and established African Americans as junior partners in the city’s governing regime (Bayor, 1996, Chapter 2; Brown-Nagin, 2011, p. 42; Hornsby, 2009, pp. 80–81; Stone, 1989, pp. 29–31). Black electoral power inspired immediate reaction. In 1950,
Governor Eugene Talmadge warned that a “pro–civil rights crowd” would “manipulat[e] the bloc vote centered in Atlanta” to undermine white supremacy and social order, spurring statewide efforts to dilute and stigmatize the black vote (Kousser, 1999, p. 203). Hartsfield was himself ill at ease with his coalition partners, convinced that the prospect of a majority black electorate and black officeholders would drive whites out of the city and spell Atlanta’s doom. In the early 1940s, the mayor privately warned local business leaders that Atlanta faced a drain of “good home owning citizens” to the surrounding suburbs; African Americans would soon dominate the city “if our white citizens are just going to move out and give it to them” (“From William B. Hartsfield,” 1943; see also “Remarks of Wm. B. Hartsfield,” 1941). Although postwar Atlanta leaders earnestly sought to portray the city as tolerant and progressive, those leaders also sought a spatial fix to thwart black political power. (p. 442)

Key to Connor’s and Kruse’s analyses is the role of an emerging colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2015) in allowing white communities to protect the accrued advantages of whiteness (which, as indicated above, were originally consolidated under the auspices of a vocal political racism) by appealing to ostensibly neutral political norms such as local control and tax equity.

The operation of this sort of ahistorical politics was perhaps clearest in 2011, when minority legislators and voters, including the Rev. Joseph Lowery, challenged the creation of several of these new cities under the Voting Rights Act. They opposed cityhood in the northern, white suburbs on the grounds that the new ‘differentiation of space’ (Jung, 2011) infringed upon the rights of minorities by “creating white-majority governments and stripping black voters of their ability to elect whom they wanted” (Copeland, 2012). This lawsuit was dismissed, with the courts finding that these new cities were products of simple geography and were not motivated by racial animus (Connor, 2015).
Troublingly, the claim that race is analytically separable from other factors (such as geography) is consistent with the post-war status quo in inequality research, which has “tended as a matter of method (and perhaps of politics) to place a high burden of proof on claims that racial discrimination or bias per se account for observed racial disparities, and indeed to recognize the significance of race only when other explanatory factors are eliminated” (Connor, 2015, pp. 438-39; Reskin, 2012). This common mode of thought not only produces whitewashed analytical objects (such as cities) free from histories of race and racism, it obscures the operation of colorblind institutions and norms that maintain racially disparate outcomes. In short, the Lowery decision—and the logic that undergirds it—denies the immanence of history, the vestiges and reproductions (material, political, cultural) that tie us to the past.

Pro-cityhood activists such as Jason Lary and Oliver Porter, and even opponents like Marjorie Snook, discuss cityhood in fundamentally ahistorical terms. And their rhetoric is a product largely of the hegemonic imagineering machine that has dominated politics and representation in Atlanta for decades. This limited spectrum of debates around cityhood ignores basic questions of how particular spaces (e.g. Sandy Springs, South DeKalb, Brookhaven, West and South Fulton, Dunwoody, and the Lakeside area that helped to birth the LaVista Hills movement) came to contain certain types of people, and how the presence of those people in those spaces directed or determined decisions around development, taxations, service provision, and, ultimately, power. These analyses further recall a historic violence of organized forgetting (Giroux 2014) and an intentional project of imagineering (Rutheiser, 1996) in Atlanta, whereby a political hegemony structured by political and economic elites has produced the modification of collective memory towards a sanitized urban history and landscape in and around the City of Atlanta.
Henry Giroux’s work on organized forgetting is, I think, a compelling starting point for our analysis of the ahistoricism that inheres within the urban secession movement. Giroux argues that the fragmentation and erasure of knowledge (historical or otherwise) under late capitalism produces the conditions for political projects that reproduce historical violences. This claim echoes other work in the field of agnotology, which makes similar arguments about the production of ignorance and the willful erasure of and violence against the past and their interconnected role in shaping contemporary politics. Nevertheless, as Faulkner reminds us, “[t]he past is never dead. It’s not even past.” This project supports such a claim.

In this thesis (including the first section of this chapter), I also utilize Charles Rutheiser’s conceptualization of imagineering, the process by which Atlanta’s elite governance regime has, since mid-century and even before, worked to produce space and narrative in and around Atlanta. Rutheiser argues that this has been a concerted attempt to erase the fractious racial history of the city in order to hold up Atlanta as the business-friendly and culturally progressive City Too Busy to Hate, while at the same time reproducing the material and political conditions that have produced and continue to produce fractures. This concerted imagineering erases history and naturalizes socio-spatial relations, producing a sort of blank slate into which myths can easily penetrate, and presenting little resistance to the ongoing inculcation of colorblindness. Imagineering resonates with the discussions later in this section on Du Bois’ shibboleth and the anti-politics of cityhood, and thus with fundamental and enduring questions of historiography, race, and power.

To understand the intersection of these histories of organized forgetting and imagineering

---

2 Agnotology refers to the study of ignorance, particularly that which is willfully manufactured. I recommend Tom Slater’s and Jennifer Logue’s papers on the topic, cited in the references section of this thesis.
3 From Faulkner’s “Requiem for a Nun”
with the particular, ahistorical analytical approach favored by proponents of cityhood, we must, following Rosen (2017), turn to Oliver Porter. Porter was instrumental in developing the governance model for Sandy Springs, and is as close to a cityhood guru as one is likely to encounter in Atlanta. Nevertheless, 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 are actually deeply ideological and political claims about the ways in which the world does and should work.

What Porter is attempting to perform is a sort of anti-politics that distorts the vulgar economism of his political philosophy. The anthropologist James Ferguson (1994) develops the concept of anti-politics in his study of development in Lesotho, *The Anti-Politics Machine*. In this markedly different context, Ferguson illuminates the desire of politicians, organizers, and experts to cast political decisions around governance and the state as simply questions of best practices or common sense. Returning to Porter: the anti-politics of cityhood constitutes an attempt to cast a rabid focus on the financial bottom-line as merely common sense. Where Ferguson theorizes bureaucracy as the mechanism by which the political is rendered apolitical, Porter and other cityhood supporters subsume the political under the ostensibly apolitical economic.

But cityhood is unavoidably political! That urban secession as realized through the cityhood movement is political may seem a strange (i.e. wholly unremarkable, self-evident)
assertion from which to depart. After all, municipal boundary changes would necessarily require
some sort of political action, democratic or otherwise, in order to become real or effective. And
yet, as I explicate below, current understandings and analyses of incorporation and annexation
fall short in their ability to explain—or, perhaps more problematically, their interest in—the
democratic praxis, ideological framing, racial politics, and political economies of urban
secession.

By reconceptualizing urban secession movements as explicitly political projects, I am
seeking not only to push up against and past the limits of understanding of urban secession, but
also to recast the political as a substantive, rather than procedural or methodological, element of
urban secession. When I refer to urban secession as a political project, then, I do not mean
political in (only) the pedestrian or quotidian sense of bureaucratic procedure (e.g., as we might
understand in the ideas of political party, or electoral politics, or in the processes of voting and
legislating). By political I am suggesting several different, though equally critical and co-
constituted modifying elements through which we might arrive at a more complete
understanding of the politics of incorporation.

The first of these conceptualizations of the political is precisely the banal mode
acknowledged above, i.e. the various statutes, laws, actors, sites, histories, engagements,
ruptures, prejudices, alliances, and aims that collectively constitute our everyday notion of
politics. While insufficient, a firm grasp of politics in the weeds is nevertheless necessary—both
as a coherent (networked, institutionalized) object of analysis in its own right and as the field that
simultaneously enables and is reproduced by struggles over space—to a critical analysis of urban
secession. But politics is also fundamentally a matter of inclusion and exclusion, of visibility and
invisibility (Ranciere 2004), and concerns the structure and function of power and knowledge,
specifically with reference to hegemony, ideology, and discourse (Gramsci, 1971; Freire, 2000; Foucault, 2010, Althusser et al., 2016). It is this more complex and opaque understanding of the political that I intend throughout this thesis.

The Shibboleth

W.E.B. Du Bois, in his masterful *The Souls of Black Folk*, presciently intones that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (1903, p. 16). This imagery has proven quite durable in the hundred-plus years that have passed since Du Bois wrote the original passage. In the same section that produced the now-famous color-line dictum, Du Bois makes perhaps an even more prescient observation, though this one is offered not as an explicit pronouncement regarding the future nature of an ongoing problem, but as a correction, a clarification of the historical record. He writes:

> It was a phase of this problem [the color-line] that caused the Civil War; and however much they who marched South and North in 1861 may have fixed on the technical points of union and local autonomy as a shibboleth, all nevertheless knew, as we know, that the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of the conflict. Curious it was, too, how this deeper question ever forced itself to the surface despite effort and disclaimer.

The technical shibboleth, Du Bois argues, gives political cover for the South to pursue its white supremacist goals, and indeed the question of states’ rights has been and continues to be an effective smoke screen for the fight over slavery and its contested historiography in the United States. While I remain slightly uncomfortable with the clear, bright line that Du Bois suggests between *shibboleth* and *reality*—I wonder, for instance, how Bourdieu (1977), who insisted on the ideological, co-productive, and reproductive intersection of subjective and objective (i.e. habitus and field), might respond to Du Bois on this point—the utility of his conceptual framing
in the passage above is tremendous. Setting aside this question of the possibility and necessity of distinguishing the objective reality from the subjective narrative, Du Bois’ theorization of the technical as a smokescreen for the political resonates both broadly and specifically with this project, as I deal with questions of representation and politics writ large, but also with more granular questions around the obfuscation of race.

While the *shibboleth* has its roots in Biblical Hebrew histories, as a means of determining and policing in-group belonging, it has since taken on a slightly broader character, being taken up in fiction, humanities, and the social sciences as a conceptual tool. In Geography specifically, the shibboleth has been employed as a means of discussing disciplinary commitments. Castree (2004), for instance, contends that shibboleths are simply “beliefs that a set of like-minded people take to be axiomatic” (p. 134). It is largely this usage of the word that I intend in this section, though I think the deception (of self, of others) implicit in Du Bois’ use of the term is also instructive.

As should now be transparent from the previous paragraphs, the shibboleth is not simply a historical mechanism—indeed it is, in many ways, profoundly modern. We see echoes of Du Bois’ use of the technical shibboleth in histories of white flight, tax revolts, housing covenants, and other political technologies that have intersected the color-line (see, e.g. Kruse, 2006). I have elsewhere operationalized the shibboleth as a form of anti-politics (Allums, 2017), and I think this is still the most compelling way to engage Du Bois around the question of cityhood. Theorized in this manner, anti-politics (which I have linked above to organized forgetting and imagineering) cohere around the political, discursive object of the shibboleth. I see the intentional forcing of the deeper, unavoidably political questions obscured by, and yet—in their conspicuous absence—constitutive of, the cityhood shibboleth as a central purpose of my work.
Going forward, the conceptual apparatus of the shibboleth is employed to signal the totality of the preceding discussion on anti-politics, imagineering, and organized forgetting. While this usage is not precisely that suggested by Du Bois or offered by Castree and others, it nevertheless captures critical elements of both of those particular theorizations, while also remaining flexible enough to contain—in shorthand—the additional concepts I have introduced throughout the beginning pages of this chapter. The shibboleth will thus reappear throughout this thesis as both the theoretical touchstone that provides structure to the project and the fundamental question to which my empirical investigation responds.

**Neoliberalism**

Urban secession is political, as are the various actors arrayed around cityhood movements. We might loosely characterize this economistic politics as a form of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a political economic regime characterized by an insistence on competitive relations and economic growth, a preference for individual property rights claims over other rights claims, an extension of economic relations into the realm of social relations, and a decreasing emphasis on universal participatory politics. Since its emergence in the Reagan/Thatcher years, neoliberalism has pervaded social life, transforming social relations, governance, space, institutions, and modalities of power. Despite neoliberal adherents’ claims or assertions, markets are neither natural, nor spontaneous, nor even necessarily efficient. Neoliberalism is not a return to an idyllic, free society. Rather, like all hegemonies, the neoliberal imperative becomes ossified in various civic and governmental institutions and apparatus, and consequently in the collective sub-conscious, thus taking on an appearance of common-sense when in reality it is an
ideologically-informed and state-supported construction (Giroux, 2015; Brenner et al., 2010; Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

Neoliberalism is a complex, indeterminate, variable, and highly contested set of hegemonic ideas that intervene in social life, transforming social relations, governance, space, institutions, and modalities of power. While articulating a precise and comprehensive definition of neoliberalism or neoliberal ideology is a difficult and ongoing project in geography, Purcell (2008) offers us a 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 into all forms of social relation, and the transformation of city governance into a mechanism for attracting capital and generating profits (see also Brenner et al., 2010, Keil, 2002). Implicit in this argument is the role of government at multiple scales in producing the conditions for ostensibly spontaneous free markets and competition.
As the previous section suggests, political praxis, democratic negotiation, and the (material, discursive) production and contestation of space happen within particular contexts. Of specific concern for this thesis are the ways in which neoliberalism intersects and is co-produced with urban spaces and democratic governance. 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), Giroux (2015; 2014), and Harvey (2005) contend, neoliberalism constitutes an ideological project, a hegemonic coup, a governmentality, a ‘public pedagogy’ (Giroux, 2014), and, most essentially, a deepening and broadening of market logics. In its most basic form, this hegemonic argument 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).

Critical Perspectives on Race: Racial Projects

By now it is commonly understood in the social sciences that race is a social construct with no basis in biology. Despite centuries of moral philosophy and theology alleging racial difference and permitting, even encouraging, rape, slavery, plunder, and violent paternalism on racial grounds; despite decades of scientific and pseudoscientific studies purporting to show measurable anatomical, genetic, or biological differences between races; despite even the needs of the modern state to categorize, tabulate, and administer based on fixed categories, race remains a mutable, fundamentally social category.

For a more thorough examination of neoliberalization as urban governance, see Brenner & Theodore (2002; 2005).
Race, in other words, is something that is produced (and, frequently, codified or otherwise reified) rather than a natural—i.e. innate, immutable, genetically-determined—category or set of categories which we have discovered or observed. Not only have certain races been invented at certain points in time, in reference to certain places, and for certain purposes, but the qualifications, ocular or otherwise, for belonging or being assigned to a particular race have also varied wildly across history and geography. Haney López (2006) lays bare this truth about race in his dissection of the historical body of American legal opinions related to the determination of race. He shows that the judicial system of the United States not only lacked a standard paradigm for determining whiteness in cases where a person’s race was germane to issues of citizenship and immigration (was it a scientific standard? A common sense demarcation?)

Race is unreal and unstable, and this project treats it as such. Yet, despite—and, perhaps, because of—the flexible, adaptable, and wholly fictitious nature of race and racial categories, the immanent, persistent problems of racism in the United States remain both real and intractable. What’s more, as ideological subjects, we interpret our environment, other people, art, media, and all manner of other things through a racial lens, even though many of us purport not to ‘see race.’ Added to this, a vocal and unapologetic white supremacist movement (with its attendant scientific racism and ethno-nationalism) has recently re-emerged as a considerable force in civic life and has found purchase and voice in political campaigns and public offices. These (often conflicting) racial ideas, claims, and empirical realities make theorizing race, along with its impacts and social determinants, particularly challenging. Critical Race Theory offers one way forward.

Omi & Winant (2015) introduce a language of racial projects into social science theory, signaling a critical turn in the social scientific understanding of race. 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). Geographers have engaged with the concept of racialization, particularly in considering the mechanisms by which race is co-produced with space (Delaney, 2002; Hankins, Cochran, & Derickson, 2012; Holloway, 2000, Winders, 2005).

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 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. An understanding of racial projects has been significant in various strands of geographic literature. Some scholars have used racial projects to think through covert racism in studies of environmental justice (Holifield, 2001; Pulido, 1996; Pulido, 2000). Others have used the idea of racial projects to inform analyses of contested territories (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004), and still others have thought about racial projects on the landscape (Leib, 2002; Schein, 1999).

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” (p. 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 which 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 (Peake & Kobayashi, 2002; Pulido, 2000). Omi & Winant (2015) see these anti-
racist projects as visible manifestation of anti-racism in a world where racism has gone
‘underground,’ and is frequently denied and unacknowledged as explicit white supremacist
practice has diminished.

**Critical Perspectives on Race: Whiteness and Colorblind Racism**

Related to this discussion of the underground nature of racism, Omi & Winant address
colorblindness, a hegemonic racial politics that has emerged in the aftermath of World War II.
Bonilla-Silva (2014) complements this work on colorblindness:

> I contend that whites have developed powerful explanations—which have ultimately become
> justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for
> the status of people of color. These explanations emanate from a new racial ideology that I label
> *color-blind racism*...Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt
> system of racial oppression in the pre-civil rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the
> ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era. And the
> beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare,
> without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards...Thus whites enunciate positions
> that safeguard their racial interests without sounding ‘racist.’ (pp. 2-4).

Dealing with the hegemony of colorblindness is necessary for uncovering the ways in which
racial projects in the post-civil rights era can be hidden, rhetorically and politically, in a society
that ‘doesn’t see race.’ A theory of colorblindness is thus an integral component of a holistic
critical race theory and instrumental to understanding the operation of the politics of urban
secession in the contemporary South.

But a theory of colorblindness is insufficient. If we understand colorblindness as a bid to
maintain and condense white privilege accumulated under more explicitly white supremacist
regimes, we might also desire to investigate whiteness itself. In particular, as Staiger (2004), Vanderbeck (2008) and other scholars of race have demonstrated, questions of whiteness, which have been taken up in geography more slowly than have other approaches to understanding race (Shaw, 2006), intersect the performance of colorblind politics in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. This is especially true of Atlanta’s urban secession movements.

Whiteness is simultaneously a social relation of power, an embodied marker onto which social values 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; Schuermans et al., 2015), that both produces and is inflected by processes of racialization. Of particular relevance for this investigation 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 essay 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. Nevertheless, as Shaw (2006) reminds us, it is precisely these contradictions that render whiteness as a contingent, and, ultimately, contestable phenomenon.
Conclusion

In sum, it is within the dual context of what Connor (2015) refers to as ‘historical amnesia’ and ‘past racially motivated boundary work’—that is, within a previously racially differentiated space and an anti-political regime of organized forgetting and imagineering—that I situate my investigation of the politics of urban secession in DeKalb County. Further, it is through the intervention of this critical perspective on organized forgetting outlined above that I will provide a necessary corrective to the existing literature on urban secession, and complement and expand upon explanations of the production of urban space that rely on race and/or neoliberalism. Considering the totality of the above as the theoretical milieu within which I will situate the remainder of this project, I proceed towards a discussion of my methodological approach.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Study Area: Before LaVista Hills

In November of 2015, the City of LaVista Hills, GA, (seen below, in Figure 2) was defeated by ballot initiative, losing its incorporation bid by 139 votes. Had its proponents succeeded in their efforts, LaVista Hills would have incorporated a significant amount of land (including valuable commercial property) in DeKalb County and drawn a boundary around a disproportionately white and wealthy corner of unincorporated county area. DeKalb County, unlike most of the rest of the state of Georgia, is densely populated, highly urbanized, and majority African-American. A plurality of these African-Americans lives in unincorporated areas.
Immediately after the defeat, LaVista Hills YES! (one group advancing LaVista Hills’ incorporation agenda) conceded that things did not look promising for the city and that they were no longer pursuing the ballot initiative for LaVista Hills—the effort seemed dead (Wisenhunt, 2015a). However, three months later, another group, Citizens for Cityhood, jumpstarted the fervor in the LaVista Hills area again, suggesting annexation into Chamblee, an existing city, as an alternative to remaining in the county (Wisenhunt, 2016). LaVista Hills, or at least some parts of it, seem desperate to leave the county by whatever means possible.

LaVista Hills is only the latest in an increasingly forceful stream of new city proposals in the Atlanta area that have followed the incorporation of Sandy Springs in Fulton County in 2005. The history of Sandy Springs is complex, and its impacts have been far-reaching. Indeed, an entire thesis could be written focusing only on Sandy Springs. This is, for better or worse, not that thesis. Nevertheless, Sandy Springs, as the progenitor of the current cityhood push, remains relevant to the project of theorizing urban secession. More recent cities have roughly mimicked Sandy Springs’ successful bid. Rhetorically and strategically, these more recent movements—to a lesser or greater degree—echo Sandy Springs’ founding claims around tax equity, local control, small government, privatization, and government efficiency. They also tend to mimic Sandy Springs in form, placing those responsible for the instigation of the cityhood initiative in control of the newly-formed city, providing only the barest number of services allowed under Georgia law—i.e. continuing to rely on county governments for most needs—, and privatizing where possible and politically expedient. A journalist, with whom I spoke during the course of my data collection, characterizes the importance of the Sandy Springs victory thusly:

The Republican control of the legislature allowed for Sandy Springs to be formed by act of the entire legislature, rather than by consent of just its local elected officials, which was a sticking point in the past…Sandy Springs started by outsourcing a lot of the work to a major contractor,
CH2M. New York Times had a very good article a year or two ago about how Sandy Springs was kind of the model. And from there, you know, they were the first to break the barrier, but from there, other cities—once one did it, other areas also thought they could also try for similar types of local control and self-determination. And so Sandy Springs was in Fulton County, and it was the first, but it was followed by three other cities in Fulton County, one in Gwinnett County, and now three in DeKalb County, for a total of eight over the last decade...

In DeKalb County specifically—just as in Fulton County—these initiatives began in the wealthy, northern suburbs. The City of Dunwoody incorporated in 2008 and the City of Brookhaven in 2012. Following the eventually successful incorporation of Brookhaven, there was a relative lull in cityhood energy in the metro area. By this point, much of the northern portion of the county was incorporated (Doraville and Chamblee, the two other main cities in the northern portion of the county, have existed as such since 1907 and 1871, respectively). Then, in 2015, LaVista Hills emerged from the union of two smaller cityhood movements. A final map and feasibility study were quickly approved by the state legislature, and the hopeful City of LaVista Hills found itself on a referendum ballot in November of 2015.

At the present moment, there are cityhood and annexation proposals under consideration (I mean this to include proposals in various stages of internal development, proposals that have been submitted for ballot approval, and proposals that are on upcoming ballots or have already been on a ballot) that, in toto, would incorporate virtually all of the remaining unincorporated area in DeKalb County. These include, notably, a recently incorporated city in South DeKalb, proposed annexations of unincorporated commercial property into the City of Decatur, and an initiative to have the historic Druid Hills neighborhood as well as Emory University and the Centers for Disease Control annexed into the City of Atlanta. These movements also include the recently-incorporated (in November of 2016) City of Stonecrest (seen below in Figure 2) out of
the predominantly black, middle-class corner of Southeast DeKalb County, which will figure significantly in later chapters of this thesis.

Figure 2: Atlanta’s new cities

**Study Area: DeKalb’s New Cities: LaVista Hills, Greenhaven, Stonecrest**

DeKalb County is predominantly urban county which sits just east of the City of Atlanta. Along with Fulton County, DeKalb County contains, both by area and population, a significant share of
the urban core of Metro Atlanta. DeKalb County’s population is roughly 55% African American, approximately 35% white, and almost 10% Hispanic or Latino. More broadly in the State of Georgia, the Hispanic or Latino population is again roughly 10%, but the African American and white proportions are reversed from the values above—whites outnumber African Americans roughly 2-to-1 statewide. DeKalb is in the top 5 of all counties in the state in terms of population, with approximately 735,000 people, and boasts the highest population density of any county in the state by a significant margin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

This project focuses explicitly on two distinct areas of DeKalb County: a predominantly white area in the North Central section of the county, and a predominantly black Southern section of the county. Both of these areas have seen recent and intense organizing and political activity around the possibility of cityhood. In both of these areas of the county, numerous and diverse cityhood movements (i.e. successive and contemporaneous proposals with different names, boundaries, constituencies, organizational/messaging capacities, and levels of popular support) have popped up in the last 5 years. These movements have variously imploded, combined, morphed, made the ballot, and suffered defeat.

The first of the two areas (i.e. the North Central section) that constitute this case study is roughly circumscribed by the proposed boundaries of the recently-defeated City of LaVista Hills. The City of LaVista Hills emerged from the merging of various organizing groups around two smaller proposed cities in the same geographical area. This area contains several historic Atlanta neighborhoods, including Druid Hills, as well as numerous valuable commercial corridors, the Centers for Disease Control, and Emory University. As I have related in the introduction, the proposed City of LaVista Hills was narrowly defeated by ballot initiative in November of 2015. Nevertheless, proponents are threatening alternative means of secession from the county.
including voluntary annexation into existing cities, including Atlanta and Chamblee.

The second area is more or less conterminous with what is colloquially—and sometimes officially—referred to as South DeKalb. While for decades this area has been a nucleus of middle-class black economic and political power in the Atlanta area, the southern portion of the county remains comparatively underdeveloped, under-resourced, and unconnected. This section of DeKalb County was also hit particularly hard by the 2008 financial crisis, with a catastrophic drop in home values and an overwhelming tide of foreclosures leaving their marks on South DeKalb’s material landscape and political consciousness. At the time of my field work, two distinct cityhood movements were active around the City of Stonecrest and the City of Greenhaven. At the time of the completion of this thesis, the City of Stonecrest had successfully incorporated out of the southern corner of South DeKalb. The remainder of South DeKalb and all of North-Central DeKalb—i.e. the remainder of my study area—remain unincorporated.

The differential character of these geographically proximate county sections provides an empirically rich and theoretically compelling context within which to probe the various questions and conceptual issues I have suggested in previous sections of this thesis. First, there has been little in-depth, critical geographical work on urban secession in the South. More particularly, there has been virtually no significant critical geographical work on urban secession in the Atlanta area since the procedural rules affecting incorporation were changed in 2005 (with the exception of Connor, 2015). Second, the landscape of DeKalb County is a product of white flight and racialized political boundary work in the 20th century, and remains largely segregated—though South DeKalb does contain a long-standing center of black middle-class power. Finally, I chose to work in DeKalb County because I have existing personal and professional connections within relevant governmental, journalistic, and activist organizations in and around DeKalb
County. These have allowed me access as a researcher to necessary and valuable spaces and people.

**Data**

In this project, I employ a qualitative methodology. I utilize semi-structured interviews with city and county officials, activist groups, and affected community members as my main mechanism for data collection. I also analyze documents, including signs, flyers, mailers, and digital literature (including public social media postings) produced by various entities representing pro-secession and anti-secession political positions, keeping written notes on all materials shared with me and all interviews. Interviews were recorded digitally on two devices. These were transcribed and matched with my field notes and any maps or other materials provided by the respondents. I also used a map elucidation technique during my interviews, where I asked respondents to react to various demographic maps of areas relevant to recent cityhood debates in DeKalb County.

Interviews for this project took place in the summer and fall of 2016, between May and October, and the general protocol was amended to accommodate different contexts and positionalities, and to clarify when necessary. I conducted approximately 20 hour-long interviews with representatives from DeKalb Strong (a group opposed to new cities in DeKalb County), LaVista Hills YES! (the main group supporting the secession of LaVista Hills), CCCSD (Concerned Citizens for Cityhood in South DeKalb, which supports the city of Greenhaven), supporters of Stonecrest and elected officials. Activists and elected officials had all been intimately involved with cityhood movements in Atlanta, and almost all cityhood supporters I spoke with were instrumental in the conception and inception of their respective
cityhood movements. In addition, I spoke with several local journalists based in DeKalb County who have covered these issues extensively. Interviews were conducted at organizational headquarters, if available, or neutral locations within the community. In all instances, I relied on snowball sampling from an initial point of contact within the cohort. I stopped sampling within each group when responses within the group began to converge significantly.

I have used both *a priori* and emergent coding to analyze and identify themes in all field notes, documents, and interview transcripts (Glesne, 2015). *A priori* codes are based in themes pulled from my theoretical framework described above. These codes included:

- Appeals to political and economic norms (e.g. “local control”, tax equity, feasibility, efficiency, growth)
- Neoliberal subjectivity
- Possessive investment in whiteness
- Acknowledgements of race
- Displacement/shibboleth

Emergent coding was critical to this project, both to cross-check *a priori* coding (and by extension, to refine my framework) and to address any new, unanticipated, or otherwise interesting themes that emerge in the process of analyzing my data. These codes included:

- Local historical consciousness
- Perspectives on idealized and lived space
- Community & group demarcation
- The use of the past and the future to frame incorporation

I have relied largely on critical discourse analysis as my analytical heuristic in evaluating all of my coded data. This approach (Fairclough, 2014; Fairclough et al., 2007; Le et al., 2009; Wodak
& Meyer, 2002) emphasizes a semiotic perspective on meaning-making within texts, uncovering power relations between speakers and writers. Critical discourse analysis mediates an engagement with text, language, and discourse, emphasizing broader economic, cultural, and social structures; ideologies; and materialities. Thus, “by analyzing the linguistic structures and discourse strategies in light of their interactional and wider social contexts, we can unlock the ideologies and recover the social meanings expressed in discourse” (Teo, 2000, p. 11). This practice is appropriate and necessary to inform my research questions—in particular the focus of critical discourse analysis on uncovering meaning and ideology within discourse will be an essential tool for thinking about racial projects under a colorblind hegemony that is undergirded by racially-coded language. More broadly, though, this sort of critical analysis allows me to think productively about the ways in which meaning interacts with ideology and politics.

I also follow Connor (2015) in my analytical approach, who in turn draws from Massey and Lipsitz, looking not for explicit or tacit admissions of racism, but rather for evidence of hostile privatism, defensive localism, or other uses of space to consolidate the accrued, material and political advantages of whiteness. So, for instance, if a representative of LaVista Hills YES! alludes to high relative tax burdens or concerns over school quality as reasons for favoring urban secession, I can understand this as an attempt to consolidate accrued economic and social privilege in a way that replicates historical systems of oppression, and thus as a racist project.

Finally, there is the issue of my own positionality in this project. DeKalb Strong and LaVista Hills YES! contain significant communities of people with similar race, class, and educational positionalities as me—including several of my neighbors from across Atlanta. These connections have been helpful in gaining access to individuals and communities articulated around these groups. Supporters of white cityhood were comfortable inviting me into their
homes and places of businesses (whereas I met most black respondents at coffee shops or similar public places), and seemed comfortable speaking with me openly about their involvement with cityhood from the moment I sat down. In all of these interviews I dressed conservatively, wearing dress slacks, dress shoes, and a collared shirt. Because I come from this class of white Atlantans, I know how to speak and act in a way that puts them at ease. Most assumed—and I did not correct them—my project to be sympathetic to cityhood, my outlook to be conservative and economistic, and spoke to me in a way that seemed almost conspiratorial at times.

Conversely, as a long-time resident of a heavily white, upper-middle class neighborhood in DeKalb County, my place and politics networks are likely to diverge in meaningful ways from those of the South DeKalb community. These differences had the potential to impact my ability to conduct the work proposed above, particularly as I was relying on interviews and snowball techniques, both of which require trust. Cultivating this sort of trust required reflexivity, or “an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings” (Etherinton, 2004, p. 19) I dressed the same for these interviews as I did in the others. While most black respondents preferred to meet in public locations, and seemed less certain at the outset about my goals with this research, I attempted to make clear through my questions that I would be a sympathetic listener. The respondents seemed to warm up to me throughout the interviews, some confiding in me their suspicions about the role of race in uneven development and cityhood initiatives (information that I had expected would be the most difficult to attain given my positionality).
Looking Forward

The analytical chapter that follows analyzes the ways in which discussions—or denials—of race and racism are employed, and how these intersect with understandings of urban secession as a racial project and with historical geographies of race in Atlanta. It considers the role of political economic forces in urban secession movements, particularly as neoliberal ascendance introduces or emphasizes a profit-logic into governance, increases municipal inter-competition, and operates to obscure the effects of and justifications for racial projects under a discursive political regime of racial colorblindness and historical amnesia. Race and neoliberalism are each inflected by the other. As I have argued previously in this thesis, race and neoliberalism are inseparable in the politics of urban secession. The following chapters take seriously that argument, and advance a reading of the politics of space that engages both race and neoliberalism towards a synthetic analysis of urban secession in Atlanta. The following chapters take seriously that argument, and advance a reading of the politics of space that engages both race and neoliberalism towards a synthetic analysis of urban secession in Atlanta.

A note on the nomenclature of the following two chapters: rather than referring to individual respondents by name or pseudonym when quoting or referencing qualitative data, I will instead indicate the group or affiliation of the respondent in context (e.g. proponent of black cityhood, cityhood opponent, state legislator). This system appropriately emphasizes the geographic and sociological articulations of particular actors around Atlanta’s various cityhood movements. It should be noted that, within my respondent cohort, all supporters of cityhood in South DeKalb (i.e. black cityhood) are black. Similarly, all supporters of cityhood in North Central DeKalb (i.e. white cityhood) are white. I will attempt to make these distinctions clear within the text, but I feel it is important to acknowledge them up front as well.
CHAPTER 4

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

“That’s the kind of place Atlanta was and still is — a place where the past is what seems unnecessary, not the future.”

- Spencer Hall, SB Nation

The Forgotten City

How is it that a universal understanding and acceptance of competition and profit — particularly to the exclusion of other potential modes and objects of analysis — has come to constitute the underlying logic of cityhood and municipal governance, as well as the predominant explanation of uneven development, in the contemporary moment? What I seek to produce here is no less than an explication of the shibboleth itself — that is, the empirical reality which the politics of urban secession in Atlanta so deftly obscures.

Among those eager to disavow or contest the racism — and, indeed, to affirm the colorblindness — of contemporary cityhood movements is Oliver Porter, a central figure in the Sandy Springs project since the 1980s. Rosen (2017), in a moment of purposeful levity and perhaps less intentional analytical clarity, characterizes Porter as “Ronald Reagan dressed up like Colonel Sanders.” Speaking to me and others (e.g. Rosen), Porter has been quick to dismiss suggestions of racism related to the incorporation of Sandy Springs and contemporary cityhood movements more generally. Rosen captures Porter’s general analysis:
Porter’s insistence on the cityhood movement’s race neutrality comes down to a question of historical aperture. Porter seemed disgusted and frustrated as I read back to him the quote about how Sandy Springs once wanted to “build up a city separate from Atlanta and [its] Negroes.” Days after our meeting, he emailed me to even more strongly reject the criticism of the cityhood movement as racist. “1960,” he wrote, referring to the general provenance of the quote, “was over half a century ago.”

Proponents of cityhood in DeKalb County largely articulate a similar understanding of the (lack of a) role of race in contemporary cityhood movements as part of a more generalized politics of urban secession, heavily inflected by anti-political organized forgetting. One supporter of cityhood in a predominantly white area of North Central DeKalb argued, in an interview with me, that

just because the south end of the county happens to be predominantly African American and the northern end of the county, which is next to the city, happens to be more affluent and white, doesn’t necessarily mean that the people in that area are doing something because of or against or in any relation to the citizens in the south end of the county. The reaction is to the absence of a functioning—well-functioning government. It’s got nothing to do I think, personally, with removing resources or—or you know, in any way objectively wanting to influence how things are done elsewhere in the county.

The rhetorical work that words and phrases like “happen to be,” “necessarily,” and “objectively” perform in the selection above is considerable, as these deflect potential challenges to whiteness and colorblindness as structural considerations which objectively exist—and have existed historically—irrespective of individual intent. Another white supporter of cityhood in the same area came to a similar conclusion:

So I'm going to probably jump ahead and anticipate what your question is and my view, as I've said before, is that anybody that asserts this is because you're of a particular race or revenue
stream or anything else is not dealing with the reality of the fact is everybody lives where they live, and whether you're in a mostly white neighborhood or a mostly black neighborhood that is just where you live...

The assertion that certain communities of people simply live where they live (and, by extension that other communities don’t), without any acknowledgement of the historical processes that have shaped and reshaped the landscape of Atlanta evidences a politics of urban secession inflected by the larger violences of organized forgetting that pervade Atlanta’s institutionalized social history.

Even a black supporter of the City of Stonecrest in South DeKalb, a predominantly black middle-class area (though still historically underserved and underresourced relative to other areas of the county), informed me that he and his neighbors “just happen to be majority African American in this footprint.” He continued: “You know, if I lived in Tucker, if I lived in LaVista Hills, I would have the same stance. I just happen to live, you know, in this—in this side of it.”

That the contemporary geography of a metropolitan area such as Atlanta—which not only figured heavily in the struggle for civil rights, but was also the setting for tremendous racial violence and exclusion (Rutheisser, 1996; Kruse, 2005)—has been so thoroughly expunged of political memory is a testament to the hegemony (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) of colorblind racism and the invisible normativity of whiteness. Many other black supporters of cityhood argue similarly, though a small minority dissent. Explaining to me why MARTA didn’t historically expand in South DeKalb in a way that might improve economic outcomes, one black cityhood supporter was blunt: “In my opinion, [the reason is] racism.” While this diagnosis represents a conceptual rupture of the shibboleth, analyses of this sort were exceedingly rare within my data.

Du Bois’ conceptualization of the object and operation of the shibboleth is not completely dissimilar from the way in which social scientists now understand the concept of colorblind
racism, or colorblindness. Both concepts deal with the ways in which race, as a fundamental practical and political category, is made invisible by ideological or political commitments. Omi & Winant (2015) theorize colorblindness as a hegemonic racial politics that has emerged in the aftermath of World War II by which institutional and systemic racism—which, despite popular claims about the success of the Civil Rights movement, has not been destroyed—is obscured by an ideological and conceptual apparatus that claims neutrality, indeed agnosticism, on the questions of race, racialization, and racial hierarchies that nevertheless persist. Dealing with the hegemony of colorblindness is necessary for uncovering the ways in which racial projects in the post-civil rights era can be hidden, rhetorically and politically, in a society that ‘doesn’t see race.’

As I have argued in previous chapters, the very real problem of colorblindness is also a problem of whiteness. Cityhood functions as a racial project for the preservation and consolidation of material advantages of whiteness, while simultaneously obscuring questions of race through the invocation of colorblind ideology. This is true not only in Connor’s study area of Fulton County and in my own study area of DeKalb County, but across the inner suburbs of Atlanta. In DeKalb County, white proponents of cityhood in predominantly white areas freely acknowledge that this sort of material consolidation is a central goal of the cityhood movement:

They're going for as much commercial as they can. And then they're going all out for commercial redevelopment and Brookhaven is covered up with redevelopment. The problem is they're covered up with mostly residential redevelopment, and now if it's multi-family, then that's kind of a halfway house between residential and commercial, because it's considered commercial, but with that comes you know, the normal commercial development, all the big box stores and all that stuff, so—and with that comes the increase in residential property—once you get above $500,000 in residential, then the residential is not so much of a burden on the services. It's somewhere in
that range depending upon the city. It's not so much, you know, a home that's $2M, it probably doesn't—it's probably contributing a lot more property taxes than you know, than it is to the police services that you provide to a $2M home.

And yet these supporters of cityhood are unable to articulate the ways in which this consolidation might result in differential impact. Similar to the Fresh Air Fund hosts in Vanderbeck’s (2008) case study, the cityhood supporter above proposes a normative whiteness (in the form of concern over property value and tax liability, instead of, for instance, social services or public transit) as the solution for racialized inequity and uneven development, which themselves are the product of a historical politics of whiteness.

These sorts of contradictions are the rule, rather than the exception among white supporters of cityhood movements in Atlanta. Another supporter argues that everybody benefits. I think that the people in the community benefit because they can get a bigger say over what goes on. I think that you know, that all of DeKalb County benefits because as you see what happened in Brookhaven and in Dunwoody, the property value has actually increased, which allows for more revenue for the schools...People said oh, you're pulling away from DeKalb County and you're going to wreck DeKalb County...It was never about that.

Proponents of black cityhood have a slightly different angle on this consolidation in predominantly white areas of the county. One supporter told me that the commercial areas in DeKalb County are being municipalized. LaVista Hills didn't pass, so that would have been another—that would have been probably the last major commercial area in the north, because the south doesn't have a commercial area. So yes, you're right on that one. The north is not being—so the county has less revenue, but that is not hurting the north. I do think the north actually benefits from this, because they have all the commercial property, people are still going up to purchase goods from them, and they do have a larger portion of their taxes within their—their city governments to spend. So I think the north has benefitted from this, and
particularly having a clause that doesn't pay into the pension plan anymore, it benefits them,
whereas the south has been hurt by this.

And yet, even in the rare instances in which the potential role of race in cityhood movements is
most explicitly seen or acknowledged—almost exclusively by black cityhood supporters—, an
analysis of racism and inequity beyond individual intent is lacking:

So one of the women wrote about what we call—we started to write an article about this—
dreaded apartment kids. We call them DAKs. They were the people who were coming into
Dunwoody from the south, okay? And she said plainly they're bringing down our scores—or
educational system—they don't contribute anything to Dunwoody, and we shouldn't allow them,
and we definitely don't want to have housing to accommodate them. That whole zoning and land
use? That's what that is all about. They want to be able to prevent poor people—i.e., also black
folk—it's both, it's poor and black—poor may be a Latino—from coming into their
neighborhoods. But I don't think—I really think we have—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, and sometimes that's tied into racism and sometimes it's not.

This supporter of black cityhood acknowledges the very real and racialized material impacts of
cityhood-cum-defensive localism, and yet is focused not on a systemic diagnosis of and struggle
against structural racism, but on whether or not the people advocating these policies are
individually racist.

What Omi & Winant, among others, urge us to see is that individual intent is irrelevant in
a diagnosis of systemic racism and of racial projects. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013), in an article titled
“The Good, Racist People,” offers us a similar diagnosis on the occasion of the racist harassment
of the actor Forest Whitaker in New York in the spring of 2013:

The idea that racism lives in the heart of particularly evil individuals, as opposed to the heart of a
democratic society, is reinforcing to anyone who might, from time to time, find their tongue sprinting ahead of their discretion. We can forgive Whitaker’s assailant. Much harder to forgive is all that makes Whitaker stand out in the first place. New York is a city, like most in America, that bears the scars of redlining, blockbusting and urban renewal. The ghost of those policies haunts us…

It is precisely these ghosts which require sustained analytical attention and explicit political exorcism. Yet, in all cases, a comprehensive analysis of cityhood as a racial project that reproduces historical inequities remains hidden and impossible largely as a result of imagineering and colorblindness, but also in an inability to diagnosis systemic, structural racism. Furthermore, the challenges presented by decades of organized, social forgetting make recovering alternative narratives difficult and politically contentious. The contradictions of whiteness roll on, and the politics of urban secession follow.

Oliver Porter is not alone in his characterization of the politics of cityhood. Other supporters of cityhood have produced similar (anti)political arguments that obscure an austere economic imperative, including one supporter of LaVista Hills, who argues that we simply “need to look at neighborhoods as economic systems in the broad sense of the term, they are flows of people in and flows of money in and out…If those things fail or decline or are no longer competitive, people will not move into the area.” I have engaged the concept of anti-politics in a previous chapter in order to diagnose and make sense of a technocratic shibboleth which obscures so much of the racialized history, politics, and discourse around cityhood. That is, I have sought to re-politicize the cityhood movement by excavating what an anti-politics of cityhood seeks to gloss over. What I explore here is the very nature of the shibboleth itself, i.e. the economistic politics of cityhood.

On the whole, proponents of urban secession see cityhood as a way to make sticky that
which under capitalism is by no means rooted in place, and under neoliberalism and systematic
deregulation has become even slipperier and more mobile (Harvey, 2005; Giroux, 2015, Brenner
& Theodore, 2005). While they lack a systemic analysis of the causes of increasing scarcity of
private resources and public funding (phenomena which—later in this chapter—I attribute to the
neoliberal turn in governance and increasingly ossified neoliberal political hegemony at multiple
scales over the past half century), proponents of cityhood understand intimately the stakes of the
competition for capital and revenue flows within which they nevertheless find themselves. A
supporter of cityhood in North Central DeKalb understands this competition as a zero-sum
struggle among localities:

Those people that live there like that believe that they are still part of that Henderson community,
and I initially tried to fight for them. Eventually Tucker basically won out everywhere. They won
out over Clarkston. They won out over Stone Mountain. They won out over us by taking the
commercial areas there and not taking the people on Pleasantdale Road, so Tucker is the one that
won all the way across the board, and they beat us down at the legislature, so Tucker beat us at
every corner.

Another cityhood supporter, this time from South DeKalb, tells a similar story:

Dunwoody formed in DeKalb County…I didn't have a problem with them incorporating. I did
have a problem with them taking Perimeter Mall. That was a big deal, because the citizens—all
the citizens of DeKalb County had invested money in DeKalb—in the Perimeter Mall—the
development of Perimeter Mall, at least on the DeKalb side. And yet, without any legal
justification, they were just able to draw their boundaries to include the most commercial portion
of DeKalb County within their boundaries, which in effect subsidized their lifestyle while taking
from us some of our income. Because of political reasons, it went through. Then Brookhaven
decided to incorporate. Didn't have any problem with that. And then Avondale began to want to
annex land. Avondale is not within the boundaries of what we will be talking about in our case,
which is Greenhaven, but the commercial—they wanted to annex commercial property…Well, what it did make me realize is that this effort to incorporate land was expanding, and it was expanding towards the south. And whenever cities want to incorporate, they want to incorporate the more valuable land, because that's to their benefit. They're not looking for the land that's not going to add to their coffers. And that's when I realized that this is going to impact us, and therefore, especially given my background, I wanted to research what that meant for South DeKalb. And so as I began to research and look at it, I realized we need to incorporate.

In this common construction of the problem—of which the two selections above are compelling examples—commercial areas, infrastructure, and easily-developed parcels are seen as economic lifelines, whereas people (citizens, constituents) are seen largely as economic liabilities. In order to ‘win’ in this game, a city must maximize its profit ratio. This means limiting things like social services and multi-family zoning (recall the statement from the previous chapter about ‘Dreaded Apartment Kids’), while strengthening private property considerations to attract large single-family homes and producing tax incentive packages in order to increase commercial development.

The simple fact of the matter, as a supporter of cityhood in South DeKalb told me, is that “you’ve got to attract that economic development” in order to survive. In particular, this struggle over artificially scarce community resources is understood as a question of branding. “The lack of an identity here,” one cityhood supporter in South DeKalb informed me, “is eventually going to put us at a disadvantage to communities that do have a clear identity and have a clear—I hate to use this word out of marketing and real estate, a brand.” Cityhood proponents are quite sensitive to the ways in which their community brand is viewed by capital. A supporter of Stonecrest argued to me that

of all the forming cities, we [Stonecrest] have the best economic mix of all of them. And that's
what you need to have to be a thriving, you know, economic engine on that end. Can you have the commercial—you know, a viable commercial area? Jobs are coming back onshore now. They're not leaving offshore as much. To be able to have a manufacturing area, a light and industrial—light and heavy industrial—we have the largest industrial area and available land in any sector of DeKalb County, but nobody is selling us. Nobody is coming—no one's going out there and saying hey, look at us, look at us, you know, we can offer you this amount of land space, this amount of warehousing. And so what's happening to us, they're driving right past us going to Rockdale and Newton County. How does that help, and how do you stop that from happening, is you have to brand your own city, you have to brand your own wares, and that's our driving force, to be able to make us a better place to be.

Discussing the success of economic development in northern—and primarily white—cities such as Brookhaven and Dunwoody, another supporter of cityhood in South DeKalb contended that these cities have a solid identity. See, 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.

A new city, in the minds of its proponents, offers a fresh start, a chance to offer a new pitch to capital. A Stonecrest supporter sums this up succinctly: “we get a new selling point, we get a new brand, we're being able to, you know, situate ourselves” to be competitive within this landscape of micro-scale differentiation. The conflation of community identity with attractiveness to capital is remarkable here, as it signals again the hegemony of neoliberalism in the politics of urban secession, and is further indicative of the sort of organized forgetting that
renders other sorts of community identity (e.g. that rooted in explicitly racialized political struggle for equity [King, 1967]) illegible or irrelevant under the neoliberal gaze of capital. This phenomenon further reifies the market as the ultimate arbiter of rights, retarding the development of other means for pursuing equity.

The inherent neoliberal attitudes of the cityhood discourse are exemplified by proponents across racial and geographic lines. When I asked whether the privatized city model pioneered by Sandy Springs (which, in a classically libertarian mode, outsources virtually all government services in exchange for lower taxes and fuzzy concepts like greater freedom and control) would work in poorer areas, a city booster informed me that it was precisely these areas that needed balanced budgets, austerity, and efficiency the most. Other supporters of cityhood invoke the danger of DeKalb County’s “monopoly” on governance, and challenge the fundamental tenants of progressive taxation with concerns over “tax equity.” Even many opponents of cityhood accept the validity of the conceptual terrain adopted and enforced by cityhood supporters, refusing to challenge the presuppositions of vulgar economics, choosing instead to focus on procedural concerns or questions of community and scale (to be clear, these are not necessarily bad approaches—they simply concede a great deal to proponents of cityhood). The generalized and ahistorical subsumption of race into economic concerns—that is, vulgar economism as a political philosophy—is near universal among supporters of cityhood, so much so that the ideology of cityhood (if we can loosely understand it as such) seems incapable not only of acknowledging a racial element, but of even conceptualizing it. Race is not a coherent category of analysis under this ideology of cityhood.

Much like the North and the South marching to war under the shibboleth of states’ rights, hopeful cityhood movements expand strategically across the landscape of Atlanta under the
shibboleth of competition. But, just as the Civil War obscured a fundamental question of equity under a techno-political guise of procedure, the politics of urban secession elide historically-inflected questions of equity under a neoliberal concern for local budgets and urban development.

**Urban Secession: An Empirical Analysis**

When citizens are viewed as atomized capitalists (as they are under neoliberalism), rather than community members or constituents, arguments for social services, democratic participation, and robust public institutions are rendered obsolete or incoherent in the face of fetishized tax cuts and privatization which are *efficient* in the abstract sense, and thus increase the *profits* of individuals and households. Cities are similarly seen first as profit-maximizing firms, rather than seats of government, centers of organization and planning, or service providers. The neoliberal austerity myth which gives rise to these understandings of people and political configurations has been disproved but remains pervasive (Varoufakis, 2016).

And yet, what can black communities in South DeKalb, who have, for so long, been underdeveloped and cast aside, do other than play the game and live to fight another day? That cities such as Stonecrest—and, to a lesser extent, Greenhaven—were ever conceived in the first place is evidence enough that the old wounds of materialized, spatialized racial difference still fester. There can be no doubt that the City of Stonecrest was imagined and incorporated as a bulwark against the further economic deterioration of underdeveloped and underresourced black communities.

---

5 Readers may also find interesting the work of Steve Keen, including his books *Debunking Economics* and *Can We Avoid Another Financial Crisis?*
communities: Marjorie Snook, an opponent of cityhood efforts in DeKalb County captures this dynamic: “It gets to a point where you’re completely surrounded by cities, and they all just selectively annex everything that’s valuable until there’s no tax base left” (Rosen, 2017). And yet, in its incorporation in the neoliberal mode, Stonecrest fails to challenge the logics of earlier cityhood movements, as well as the spatial hierarchies produced by historical movements for urban secession and segregation. Historically, movements for urban secession in wealthy, white areas in Atlanta were conceived as racial projects—a fact which Rosen accurately captures in his piece—and have had negative political, social, and economic implications for black communities. It is exactly this historical legacy into which Jason Lary, now mayor of the City of Stonecrest, and his supporters are wading.

There is more to this apparent tension between emancipatory potential and simple reproduction, and between histories of secession and current movements for black cityhood than Rosen allows. Audre Lorde, the great fighter and thinker, cautions us that the master’s tools “will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

Lary and other advocates of black cityhood generally fail to acknowledge or articulate a systemic and historical analysis of development, race, and the politics of space in Atlanta. Lary, for instance, is right in noting the difference in property values between white and black areas. But he stops short of questioning the fundamental reasons why that difference exists. This tension is not ironic, as Rosen contends, but instructive and fundamental—indeed, indispensable—to understanding the politics of cityhood in Atlanta. This tension is the very crux of overlapping histories of white supremacism and capitalist development.

If we read Lary, Oliver Porter, and other proponents of cityhood as articulating a particular
discourse around cityhood, the absence, the impossibility of this discourse is race. Not only does Stonecrest as it currently exists fail to fundamentally challenge the structures that produce racial inequity in Atlanta, it seems impossible that it could do so. The absence of a consideration of race and the emphasis on bare economics in arguments in favor of cityhood suggests to us that the cityhood movement—whether white or black in any given iteration—is, and largely wishes to remain, colorblind. But, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, and other scholars of race and racism have demonstrated, and as I have articulated throughout this thesis, such colorblindness only serves to reproduce already-existing difference. This colorblindness also represents a sort of historical rupture in black politics, a significant reversal from previous black middle-class movements in Atlanta—and elsewhere—which were explicitly race-conscious and advanced rights claims along explicitly racial lines (see, for example, Du Bois, 1903; Baldwin, 1963; King, 1967; Stone, 1989).

A parallel concern revolves around the conceptualization of Atlanta as the (as-yet-unrealized) Black Mecca. The invocation of Atlanta as such coheres around a particular socio-political construction of the black middle class. Stonecrest embodies this very construction, with its emphasis on home values, economic development, self-sufficiency, and middle-class values more generally. And while a black middle class city does, at least nominally, challenge legacies of racialized capitalism and uneven development, it simultaneously advances a form of class warfare wherein a racially marginalized black middle class rejects solidarity with those they perceive as beneath them in order to compete. Thus, not only does black cityhood fail to challenge racial power structures, it also actively reproduces in a classist mode the exclusionary and extractive systems that create and exacerbate inequality in black communities.

Nevertheless, a temporary victory may seem or even be necessary, and indeed may
constitute a positive outcome for the residents of Stonecrest, as the cityhood dominoes continue to fall and outcomes south of I-20 continue generally to lag, particularly post-recession. But if Stonecrest is a defensive structure, a product of Lary’s reading the writing on the wall, it seems unlikely to produce results beyond simply keeping the city’s collective head above water. Perhaps we should celebrate this result. But as Lorde insists, structural change is required in order to change the rules; until then, the game—as it has been for so long in Atlanta—seems likely to remain one of inequity and uneven development on a still-racialized landscape. Thus, while Stonecrest may not present a structural challenge to the processes of uneven development, racial marginalization, and organized forgetting, we may nevertheless have to accept the cityhood result as the lesser of evils. We cannot, though, accept its political success as potential incorporated center of black political economic power without a consistent, critical eye to the difference that cityhood reproduces in Atlanta.

How are we, then, to make sense of the disconnect between the spatial history and impact of these new cities on the one hand, and the inability of proponents to acknowledge the relevance of race and historical politics to debates around urban secession? How are we to understand the analytical insistence within the cityhood debate on the simple economic present at the expense of the complex racialized past? There are likely some answers in the work of authors who study ideology and the production of subjectivity, such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, or even Pierre Bourdieu. We might construct cityhood as a particular sort of discourse, or a problematic that leaves questions of race unformulated, and produces or interpellates subjects through ideology. I see some utility here, and hope to explore these possibilities in a different space.

Here, though, I return to Du Bois’ shibboleth and its attendant mechanics of elision, fragmentation, and erasure. The manner in which supporters of cityhood discuss cityhood is
fundamentally ahistorical, a product largely of the hegemonic, anti-political imagineering and organized forgetting machine that has dominated politics and representation in Atlanta for decades. The spectrum of discussion ignores basic questions of how particular spaces came to contain certain types of people, how racially-inflected social and spatial relations come to be reproduced, and how the variegated presence of different communities of people in space has directed or determined decisions around development, taxations, service provision, and, ultimately, power. Political debate is directed around the economistic shibboleth of cityhood, and the violence of organized forgetting proceeds.

In the final analysis, despite proponents’ spirited arguments to the contrary, these new, majority-white cities constitute racial projects that result in a bounding and consolidating of accrued privileges of whiteness, both material and political, on the urban landscape. The existence of black movements for cityhood—which many of my respondents invoked in response to suggestions of disparate racial impact—does not constitute a salient counterpoint. Rather, these simply demonstrate that black communities are reading the writing on the wall, demonstrate the extent to which white cityhood and the further erosion of a collective county tax base is seen as a threat to the possibility of the realization of the Black Mecca in these areas, and suggest the extent and contours of anti-political forgetting as predominant force for structural stagnation in Atlanta’s local politics.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: A FINAL ANALYSIS

Impact

This project makes empirical contributions to the literatures on urban secession through a sustained engagement with critical race theory, neoliberalism and its hegemony, and the operation of organized forgetting, which abstracts and elides relevant political and historical questions of race and equity under the economistic shibboleth of cityhood. By incorporating an emphasis on racial projects, I demonstrate an approach to analyzing urban secession movements that can contend with local political governance in a neoliberalized and colorblind context. While some critical work on urban secession has emphasized neo-conservative politics, I show that whiteness, colorblind racism, and hegemonic neoliberalism are also significant factors in social and political movements around urban secession. In this I hope to contribute to antiracist praxis and theory and to the destabilization of whiteworlds (Bonds & Inwood, 2015; Gillborn, 2006).

I also complicate conventional analyses of urban secession that suggest secession as a response to existential threat. This story is incomplete, though, as I have noted previously, it nevertheless remains the predominant explanation for urban secession. In some instances, such as Stonecrest, there is a threat which precipitates incorporation. But in the case of Stonecrest it is not an impending annexation or other hostile takeover. Rather, Stonecrest is an attempt to ensure that the community is able to hang onto at least a small slice of an ever-shrinking economic pie. Other cities, such as Sandy Springs or LaVista Hills, are more purely political or ideological constructions that face no true threat. This is an important complication of our understanding of
the operation of urban secession in the social sciences.

Other points of significance are more mundane but no less relevant. If we accept Waldner & Smith’s (2015) argument about the role of pioneer cities in decreasing barriers to entry for other new cities, it is likely that the number of new city proposals will continue to increase following the successful incorporation of Sandy Springs, Milton, and other new cities in the last decade. Additionally, the scale of these projects increases their significance. Greenhaven, for instance, would include over 300,000 people, making it the second-biggest city by population in the entire state. Combined with a successful LaVista Hills, these cities would have incorporated over half of the total land area in the entire county. These projects are massive, and thus have the potential to massively impact people and places included and excluded by their proposed borders.

Limitations and Future Research

This project, while critical in design and impact, is necessarily limited by the constraints of a two-year Master’s program. I was only able to collect data during one short period, and was unable to return for follow up interviews with respondents. Due to time constraints, I was forced to limit my data collection to current cityhood movements, and was unable to spend much time investigating historical movements through primary sources. I was also constrained in my ability to analyze documents in addition to interviews. While I made implicit use of some flyers, mailers, and other materials in the empirical sections of this thesis, the archival component of this research was an unfortunate victim of the realities of time.

Nevertheless, in the course of producing this thesis, several opportunities for future research have emerged. First, I intend to expand the scope of my investigation beyond the
Atlanta area. Second, I plan to further explore the genealogy of the city and of other modes of territorialization in the United States, building on this project which gives a more cursory account of the legal, political, and technical mechanisms by which incorporation and annexation occur. Finally and most critically: where my Master’s research treats political subjectivity and ideological positioning around cityhood as a priori, and not as central objects of study in themselves, I seek to disrupt the perception and treatment of subjectivity and ideology as static and explanatory. Each of these opportunities is an invitation to formulate different types of questions than I have previously asked. For instance, how are particular political subjects in debates around incorporation constructed as effects of politics, ideology, and social structures? What do we gain by conceptualizing the object of the city as an effect of discursive, technical, and social practices around cities, as a form of practice?

Existing urban literature dealing with questions of ideology, social structure, subjectivity, cities, and related themes largely conceptualizes these categories as causes, rather than effects, of social and political economic phenomena. Relevant and notable exceptions to this rule include Del Percio (2015) and Wachsmuth (2014), who instead consider how these various subjects and objects (e.g. cities, political actors) come to be constituted through and along with ideologies, practices, and technologies.

In his paper, Wachsmuth demonstrates the ways in which historically informed analytical categories or ‘tropes’ around urbanity become ideological representations in contemporary urbanism. Wachsmuth (p. 75) positions his essay as an answer to Lefebvre’s assertion that the “concept of the city no longer corresponds to a social object. Sociologically it is a pseudoconcept. However, the city has a historical existence that is impossible to ignore...An image or representation of the city can perpetuate itself, survive its conditions...In other words,
the ‘real’ sociological ‘object’ is an image and [above all] an ideology!” He urges us to see the city as a category of practice, rather than a discrete ‘moment in urbanization processes.’

In future work, I aim to extend the thought of scholars like Wachsmuth and David Harvey in questioning cities, politics, and ontology, while simultaneously presenting a new conceptual approach to examining the under-studied issue of urban secession. The questions I suggest above take me beyond the empirical social science of my original project and into a genealogical exploration of the problematic (Althusser et al., 2016) of cityhood (i.e. the framework within which city and cityhood are rendered coherent concepts, or, as Foucault might suggest, the discourse in which knowledge around city/cityhood is produced).

Future work will require an augmentation of the methodologies of which I have made productive use over the past several years. I specifically anticipate this project will require significant engagement with primary texts, both legal and political, as well as what Barkan (2013) describes as “careful readings in political and social theory” (p. 4). These methods will necessarily complement a more grounded, qualitative investigation of incorporation and annexation within a broader, or otherwise more differentiated contextual landscape.

I am also interested in exploring the question of organized forgetting with respect to cityhood from a slightly different angle than the one utilized in this thesis. I’ve theorized forgetting as necessary—though not sufficient—for the performance of a certain sort of politics of urban secession, but cityhood can also be productive of forgetting. If we return again to Rosen (2017) with this inverted perspective, and consider anew his characterization of the failed City of LaVista Hills as a neighborhood, new sorts of questions arise than I have asked in this thesis. For instance, what sort of future political work does the misrecognition and misrepresentation in a major print outlet of the historical spatiality and politics of LaVista Hills perform? The resistance
to LaVista Hills during the 2015 campaign relied, at least in part, on the recognition that LaVista Hills was a geographical kitchen sink of sorts, and did not contain a coherent community or shared history, and thus, in addition to its problematic racial and economic politics, was at its core an illegitimate movement.

A related avenue of interrogation relates to the new City of Tucker, which sits on the eastern edge of DeKalb County Tucker—which many, including myself, believed to already be a city—was incorporated on the same ballot that saw LaVista Hills narrowly fall, and inspired comparatively little resistance in its bid. I, similarly, did not include Tucker in this research, because its settledness as an extant community seemed to suggest little in the way of political controversy. I now wonder what I might have gained in including a third case study in this work, and hope to return to this investigation in the future. In both instances I’ve just described, while the identification of the legitimacy of a community with a particular temporal period of spatial settledness is perhaps not itself a totally compelling paradigm, the relation between representations of place and the politics of place deserve further consideration with respect to cityhood.

A Final Analysis

In the age of an ascendant and vocal white supremacy and violent economic revanchism, most troublingly resident in the White House, it might seem prudent or necessary to dismiss colorblindness and neoliberalism as no longer useful analytical categories in confronting a more

---

6 The city of South Fulton, the most recent city to incorporate, is a similar case to Stonecrest. It is a historical center of black middle-class economic and political power. Interestingly, in its recent city council elections, the city elected a self-identified socialist council member, a move which, at least nominally, challenges some of the analysis of this thesis with respect to the neoliberal anti-politics of urban secession. I hope to revisit this particular case in future work.
strident racial rhetoric and its attendant violences. And yet, this is precisely the moment in which we must maintain vigilance around colorblind racism and the pernicious hegemony of the neoliberal state. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, whiteness functions through an unholy alliance with colorblindness in the neoliberal practice of cityhood. One reproduces racialized relations and spaces of power, consolidating unto itself the benefits of historical domination and marginalization. The other obscures this reproduction as merely an artifact of neutral economics, producing a fundamental misrecognition of the processes and histories that undergird reality.

The seemingly banal workings of neoliberalism and colorblind racism seem almost quaint in the shadow of increased deportation, police shootings, mass incarceration, and a re-energized war on terror. But the sound and the fury produced by these do not mean that colorblind racism and neoliberal racial projects will stop; it simply means they will have more noise within which to hide, more hysteria within which to be silently forgotten.

This thesis advances a critical and timely analysis of urban secession in the Southeastern United States. In Atlanta, pressing issues related to growing interest in urban secession include the provision of social services, the annexation of lucrative business districts and other commercial property into new or existing cities, and the general re-shuffling of political power and political, economic, and material resources. In a time of economic austerity and general distaste for spending on welfare programs, the creation of certain types of new cities (e.g. LaVista Hills) not only excludes families with lower incomes from remaining social services, it limits the revenues available to counties or other, larger political configurations to provide these services. And while a black middle class city such as Stonecrest does, at least nominally, challenge legacies of racialized capitalism and uneven development, it simultaneously advances a form of class warfare wherein a racially marginalized black middle class rejects solidarity with
those they perceive as beneath them in order to compete. Thus, not only does black cityhood fail to challenge racial power structures, it also actively reproduces in a classist mode the exclusionary and extractive systems that create and exacerbate inequality in black communities.

There is no doubt that the City of Stonecrest represents an implicit acknowledgement of the reality of black history and marginalization in Atlanta. It embodies a significant opportunity for the black middle class in Atlanta to reclaim the promise of Atlanta as the Black Mecca, a promise which for so long has only been a partial, or, at best, qualified reality. But just as legal segregation became restrictive covenants became white flight became tax revolts, I fear that cityhood will remain a nominal improvement, as the racial and economic currents that have shaped space in Atlanta since its inception continue to predominate.

We must consider history and geography outside of the imagineered and strategically forgotten social canon of Atlanta if we hope to move towards a more urgent and incisive politics around cityhood. Remembering, critically 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.

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. 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 futures that these
stories obscure or preclude. 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.
REFERENCES


