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## Coming Together and Falling Apart: Producing and Contesting Place on the Atlanta Beltline

Jessica Martinez

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COMING TOGETHER AND FALLING APART: PRODUCING AND CONTESTING PLACE ON THE  
ATLANTA BELTLINE

by

Jessica Martinez

Bachelor of Science  
Georgia State University, 2016

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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2019

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Carlitos and Taylor for believing accepting me as I am and encouraging me not to be complacent.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever grateful to Dr. David Kneas, my advisor, and Dr. Conor Harrison and Dr. Amy Mills, my committee members, for their encouragement, support, and advice throughout my graduate career as well as their time in simply listening. All three have been instrumental in helping me become a stronger researcher and determine what is next. I also thank Dr. Christy Visaggi, who encouraged me to pursue graduate school and believe in my abilities to succeed by serving as my mentor throughout all four of my undergraduate years.

## ABSTRACT

In their efforts to revitalize and reimagine Atlanta, local government, private-public entities, and environmental organizations infuse green projects with the rhetoric of community engagement and local participation. The Atlanta Beltline, a circular greenway system of interconnected parks and trails that adaptably reuses abandoned rail lines surrounding the city, is Atlanta's latest multi-scaled and controversial sustainability project. One of the Beltline's primary goals is to act as a transformative force to create an equitable and unified city, which is evident in the Beltline's promotional slogan, *Where Atlanta Comes Together*. Narratives of community engagement and decisions involved in constructing the Beltline's built environment, however, advance processes of exclusion in salient ways under the illusion of equality that has hindered the Beltline's initial intent of reconciling racial tensions and connect Atlantans. As one of the fastest growing cities in the U.S and city with the highest income inequality, Atlanta's histories of racial segregation continue to haunt revitalized areas. These forces remain normalized and unchallenged, threatening to displace historically marginalized residents, erase existing narratives of place/ neighborhood identity, and exacerbate inequality. I will attempt to disentangle racialized histories, the power to erase/replace meanings of place, justifications of exclusion, and spaces of resistance that are hidden within urban sustainability's rhetoric.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABI.....	Atlanta Beltline Incorporated
ABP .....	Atlanta Beltline Partnership
AMFM .....	Arts, Music, Film, Movement
BAHAB.....	Beltline Affordable Housing Advisory Board
CEF .....	Community Engagement Framework
DRC .....	Design Review Committee
HJL.....	Housing Justice League
IPNA .....	Inman Park Neighborhood Association
MARTA .....	Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transit Authority
O4W .....	Old Fourth Ward
O4WBA .....	Old Fourth Ward Business Association
PCM .....	Ponce City Market
PRC .....	Peoplestown Revitalization Corporation
TAD .....	Tax Allocation District
VHCA .....	Virginia-Highland Civic Association
WEND.....	West End Neighborhood Association

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“The Atlanta BeltLine is changing the core dynamic of [Atlanta], bringing all of these disparate neighborhoods together under one vision that will transform these separate entities into one cohesive community, while still maintaining the individual character of each. The Atlanta BeltLine offers an opportunity to bridge gaps (literal and figurative), and unite the City of Atlanta in a way never before possible.” Atlanta Beltline Inc.

The Atlanta Beltline is a circular greenway system of interconnected parks and trails that adaptably reuses abandoned rail lines surrounding the city. Considering the complexity and spatial scale of this public-private project,<sup>1</sup> the Beltline’s construction has occurred in phases with 2030 as its projected date of completion. In 2012, the Eastside Trail opened to the public as the Beltline’s first finished section. Ponce City Market, located along the Eastside Trail’s north, and Krog Street Market, situated to the trail’s south, are two sites most associated with this trail. Ponce City Market stands as a symbol of a “burgeoning” area, looming over Ponce De Leon Avenue, a widely used thoroughfare and commercial corridor. In 2014, Ponce City Market out of a decaying remnant of Atlanta’s prosperous Sears, Roebuck & Company warehouse that was

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<sup>1</sup> Two entities are responsible for the Beltline’s planning and funding, Atlanta Beltline Incorporated (ABI) and Atlanta Beltline Partnership (ABP). ABI is responsible for the project’s planning and execution as well as coordinating with the City of Atlanta for funding and facilitating community engagement. ABP secures funds from private and philanthropic sources while “empower[ing] the residents of the 45 Atlanta Beltline neighborhoods through targeted partnerships in...health, housing, and economic opportunity” (Atlanta Beltline Inc., n.d.).

abandoned after the early 1990s. It features apartments in the upper floors while retail, restaurants, and workspaces occupy its lower levels. In the same year, Krog Street Market opened as “a destination for Atlanta’s intown culture” as a food hall. The Westside Trail was finalized in October 2017. Monday Night Garage, a craft brewery based in Atlanta that opened at the same time as the Westside Trail, is its popular destination. Finally, in March 2018, the City of Atlanta acquired/purchased the land required to build the Southside Trail, which will connect the Westside Trail to the Eastside (Miller, 2018a). Announcements of this land purchase and subsequent construction plans has initiated concerns in South Atlanta neighborhoods because it signals an uncertain future for its existing residents.

Unlike greenways in other American cities, the Beltline is unique in that it was conceived, in part, with specific goals to address social inequality. This intention is evident in the Beltline’s slogan Where Atlanta Comes Together, a goal of constructing 5,600 affordable housing units, and its community engagement framework (CEF), which is a legally mandated framework that involves residents in the Beltline’s decision-making processes.<sup>2</sup> As the “capital of income inequality” (Stokes, 2018) and as the “Black Mecca of the South” (Hobson, 2018), Atlanta embodies contradictions that may be used to refute the idea that the Beltline facilitates exclusion and complicates notions of environmental sustainability.

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<sup>2</sup> Quarterly meetings occur four times a year; affordable housing subcommittee meetings occur every other month; tax allocation district subcommittee meetings occur every other month, and study groups occur at least twice a month but vary depending on which of the ten subareas will be targeted.

## **1.1 PARKS AND GREENWAYS**

Scholarship about exclusion in parks or green spaces have focused on housing prices, user demographics (Price et al., 2012), physical trail conditions (Reynolds et al., 2007), and other legible metrics of population change or use patterns (Coutts, 2008; Lindsey et al., 2004; Lindsey et al., 2008) These explanations normalize simplified conceptions of stereotypical ethno-racial preference and overlooks green spaces as nature-culture assemblages influenced by past and present racialized power-relations (Byrne & Wolch, 2009). These studies also overlook the racialized connection between nature-based activities and cultural capital and the ways creation of public green spaces was often premised on displacing marginal populations (Loughran, 2017).

American urban green spaces began as private spaces reserved for property owners and elites, which emerged from the enclosure of common land once belonging to peasants in Europe. Thus, the excluded working class sought refuge from urban life in the city's margins (Gandy, 2003). In the mid-1800s when industrialization accelerated, parks offered refuge from the city and congestion of people, which further rationalized exclusion. Residential displacement resulting from the pursuit of recreating the pastoral landscape has been a characteristic of public green spaces since their inception throughout American history. In fact, park boundaries often intentionally traversed poorer communities as a way of expelling unwanted individuals (Gabriel, 2011). In other cases, parks were constructed far from neighborhoods of color to ensure use by the intended white middle and upper-class. The exclusion of undesirables aligned with "middle- and upper-class sensibilities and eugenicist ideologies about pristine wilderness,"(Byrne & Wolch, 2009) becoming the foundation for park design throughout the U.S and inscribing

“White” or Anglo-normative ideals of nature and behavior onto park landscapes, programming, and facilities (Byrne, 2012). Thus, exclusion and appropriation have been the most prominent park functions through their design and historical intended use.

The initial purpose of public parks was to instill elitist social ideals of democracy, pristine nature, and appropriate behaviors. These spaces have always enforced exclusion of poor and nonwhite users through formal and informal means. Landscape architects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century utilized parks to refine and civilize certain urban populations through nature to replicate “stable and ordered societies,” yet parks were also intended to democratize landscapes (Gandy, 2003). For example, intent on developing a “people’s park,” a trend that started in Europe in response to the exclusivity of royal gardens, Fredrick Olmstead designed New York City’s Central Park with a vision of the park as an opportunity to promote democratic space (as an extension of private spheres rather than a space for diverse interaction and political freedom). At the same time, he developed strict rules to deter users from destroying the landscape and engage in unwanted behavior (Gobster, 2007). Transportation improvements and conceptualization of green spaces as circulatory systems to address chaotic and unhealthy urban environments eventually made these spaces accessible to the working class, reinforcing the “environmental and urban knowledges” that fulfilled the goal for social order (Gabriel, 2011).

Even plans and settings designed to encourage more democratic and transparent forms of decision making are underpinned by distinct relations of power and exclusion (Hébert, 2016). Contemporary urban greening developments have increasingly incorporated collaborating planning practices that encourage the participation of impacted residents, considering the general societal suspicion of the privatization of



public spaces under neoliberalism and historical exclusion of certain individuals in democratic decision-making. Government support for the Beltline's success initially relied on community support,<sup>3</sup> which was the first step in proving that the Beltline would be a successful investment with major returns.

Despite the façade of social/environmental well-being, urban sustainability often produces landscapes whose iterations of “being green” reinforce the cultural practices of powerful groups that undermine previous understandings of place and belonging (Blomley, 2004; Combs, 2010). Checker (2011) discusses the implications of *environmental gentrification* within urban sustainability agendas where cities promote an apolitical illusion, separating justice from sustainability. Environmental gentrification represents post-political governance where traditional politics transforms into a “negotiation of interests...in the guise of a more or less universal consensus” (212) that supports the neoliberal order. As urban communities undergo “greening” processes, environmental gentrification obliterates spaces for low-income individuals. Meanwhile, governments overlook sources of social inequalities to emphasize aesthetics and allegedly encourage environmental conservation. Similarly, Dooling (2009) employs *ecological gentrification* in a similar manner but extends Checker's argument by associating the term with an “environmental ethic” (621), investigating the material and spatial experiences of homeless individuals who are forced to live in green spaces. These landscapes reflect dominant conceptualizations of home, homelessness, and green space that are rooted in ideologies prioritizing property, privacy, and distinct boundaries of space. McClintock (2018) frames *ecogentrification* as a function of racial capitalism and

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<sup>3</sup> Campaigns to promote the Beltline to neighborhood groups started as early as 2001.

central to racialized othering. In tracing the valorization of urban agriculture to a city's broader brand and as symbolic capital, McClintock asserts urban landscapes are depicted as people-less spaces while simultaneously de-valorizing the narratives of place and presence of existing nonwhite residents.

Parks symbolize tensions between residents and local planners where the latter prioritize economic productivity rather than the concerns of residents. As private entities assume possession of green spaces, “undesirables” are removed through alterations to the built environment and implementation of anti-homelessness policy while municipal governments are increasingly excused for failing to fulfill its former responsibilities (Williams, 2006). Moreover, Mitchell (2003) asserts the right to the city and to public space is never guaranteed and always involves contestation. Public space, therefore, is defined by struggle. Mitchell contends that informal methods of social control are more effective than formal methods, such as trivial alterations to built environments or rules within spaces (explicitly stated or implicit in cultural norms) that condone certain behaviors over others. Byrne (2012) illustrates the role of cultural norms in dictating appropriate uses of spaces and in shaping perceptions regarding who is welcome and who is not. In Byrne's study, Latinx participants refused to visit a national park in Los Angeles due to their perceived lack of belonging in surrounding communities, limited knowledge of “behavioral norms,” and internalization of negative attributes assigned to ethno-racial groups they felt would aggravate white visitors (Byrne, 2012). Historical geographers (Gabriel, 2011; Gandy, 2003; Loughran, 2017) explain the former functions of urban parks/green spaces as behavior modifiers and symbols of white environmental ideals, enhancing Byrnes' findings by providing pertinent contextual background.

By the 1990s, abandoned urban industrial sites prompted renewed interest in these spaces because they represented spaces where nature and city could harmoniously co-exist and embodied a city-nature hybridity and insurgent nature aesthetic. Images of postindustrial decay invoke meanings of romanticized perceptions of a successful and interconnected Atlanta before sprawl. In post-industrial Detroit, nostalgia is “[o]ne of the ways in which society copes with the nation’s failure to live up to its implicit promises of harmony and inclusivity, [which is] an interpretation of history that compensates for a contemporary malaise, a lack of community and identity” (Mills, 2010: 15). As demonstrated in successful revitalization projects that rely on certain narratives of the past, nostalgia transforms landscapes. Landscapes, in turn, are interpreted at face value without much contemplation of its prominent role in perpetuating unequal power relations and “cultural norms,” obscuring the landscape’s origins of social and political contestation (Mills, 2010). Contemporary interest in transforming underutilized and deteriorating industrial spaces represents a fetishization of decay that is reinforced by images designed to promote support for green space development, obscuring the history of disinvestment characterized by white flight to suburbs and black containment in cities that caused spaces near nonwhite communities to deteriorate in the first place (Kinney, 2012). While these “rediscovered” postindustrial spaces promote environmental and economic sustainability by serving as green spaces where land is limited, they demonstrate the shifting views of racialized aesthetics of nature that continue to be normalized by invoking politically neutral associations to nature’s ecological succession and reconstructed geographies of emptiness and potential. These narratives also alludes to the long history of exclusive access to public spaces and rationale of displacement to

achieve a certain aesthetic. These are some of the underlying contexts and processes in which plans for urban greenways have emerged.

Greenways generally traverse neighborhoods that are aesthetically pleasing as well as promote low crime rates and strong community cohesion. A community's social and built environments as well as user characteristics combine to influence trail use (Wolch et al., 2010). Wolch et al.'s (2010) research highlights social class as the main factor determining user frequency in certain trail sections, which shapes individual perception regarding trail safety and landscape aesthetics regardless of actual conditions. The study depicted segregation along trail sections after comparing trails located in different U.S regions that traverse neighborhoods with varying demographics and income levels. The most attractive and traveled trails run through predominantly middle-class communities with diverse land uses while trails surrounding communities with a larger population of non-white and lower-income communities, inadequate maintenance, and limited environmental aesthetics had the least user volume.

Greenway use increases when these spaces feature manicured vegetation and manipulate natural systems to ensure user safety and increased use. In fact, trail use decreases in sections with dense vegetation or isolation from development due to its association with diminished safety (Reynolds et al., 2007). Reynolds et al.'s research also indicates a positive correlation between commercial development and trail use. Economic prospects associated with rail-trails promote aesthetics and urban nature under the guise of environmental preservation, shaping the public's romantic perception of the possibilities contained in dereliction but requiring complete destruction of "wild" landscapes (Millington, 2015). Similarly, according to Kullmann (2013) successful urban

greenways must emphasize “otherness” yet retain familiarity by transporting users “somewhere” within nature, providing a sanitized experience within their local urban space.

## **1.2 CONTEXTUALIZING ATLANTA**

With an income inequality of 18.1, Atlanta is characterized as the city with the largest income inequality in the United States; “residents at the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile earn [an annual income of] \$16, 927” while residents in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile earn an annual income of \$306,307 (Picchi, 2018). Central Atlanta’s West, Southwest, and South have the high concentration of poverty and African American population in central compared to Atlanta’s North and East. In communities of color, the amount of renters in nonwhite neighborhoods is surpassing the amount of homeowners (Immergluck, 2018). Eighty-five percent of residents in Atlanta’s low-income and/ or African American neighborhoods are renters rather than homeowners (Flynn, 2016).

Atlanta hosts a population of 446,000 residents, half of which consists of African Americans, and “one-fourth of the city’s population lives below the poverty line” (Runfola & Hankins, 2010: 346). Similar to other cities, Atlanta’s recent history is characterized by disinvestment and expansion of racial inequality followed by reinvestment and gentrification, which further widens opportunity and inequality divides. In the current period of reinvestment, the city has encouraged economic development to accommodate the desires and needs of middle and upper-income residents while “ignoring the needs of mostly African American, poor residents” (Runfola & Hankins, 2010: 347). In 1992, the Georgia Dome was constructed with promises of initiating economic development in nearby westside neighborhoods shortly followed by the city’s

extensive measures to promote economic activity after it won the bid for the 1996 Olympics. Unsurprisingly, West Atlanta neighborhoods have not experienced the reinvestment that was promised despite the proximity to Atlanta's most popular tourist attractions (Flynn, 2016).

Urban dereliction is prominent throughout Atlanta and obscured by new "sustainable" and modern communities; this contradiction exists because it is "driven by the complex interconnections of uneven development, a supportive legal system, and basic cultural values that legitimize its perpetuation" (Runfola & Hankins, 2010: 348). Runfola and Hankins's research traces procedural inequities, which they define as "the inability of individuals to enact positive or prevent negative change in their local environment," in order to contextualize the city's patterns and prioritization of development. Despite community advocacy that exposes urban dereliction in many low-income communities in Atlanta, public officials have failed to appropriately respond to the needs of residents, representing a form of informal exclusion as it weakens the political power of these Atlantans in shaping their community's future. Meanwhile, the needs and concerns of higher-income communities nearby are quickly addressed. This blatant disregard for the concerns of lower-income residents related to the built environment exposes how the city's interests are inscribed or normalized.

Atlanta has continuously attempted to reinvent its identity throughout history to promote an illusion of inclusion using slogans or other references, such as "The City too Busy to Hate" in the 1960s or invoking conceptualizations of "southern hospitality" in the 1990s (Newman, 2002). As a southern city, however, Atlanta's history of racial segregation has restricted the mobility of its African American Atlantans that continues to

influence today's residential patterns. Physical barriers, redlining, exclusionary zoning, and urban renewal have all made a mark on Atlanta's current segregation; the real estate's use of professional codes and sanctions were the most prominent forms of exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

Atlanta has a long history of African American and low-income residential displacement. This "right manner of disposing" has and is based on racial or class discrimination; in order to justify dispossession and displacement.<sup>5</sup> Urban renewal projects of the 1950s relied on designating minority and poor communities as "blighted" or 'slums'" regardless of the actual conditions of properties in these areas, rationalizing the need for demolition (Taylor, 2010: 229). The 1996 Olympic Games hosted in Atlanta initiated mass razing of public housing throughout the city; 92% of residents living in public housing were African American (Taylor, 2010).

### **1.3 METHODS**

My study seeks to explore how Atlantans conceptualize, define, envision the Beltline, serving as a critical ethnography that analyzes the perceptions, interactions (social and material), and political processes that reinforce behavioral/ cultural ideologies and rationalize inequality and disparities in life opportunities. This stems from multi-sited fieldwork and engagement with various methods. All of the sites, participants, and sources I included in my thesis are intended to address the gaps in current literature about

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<sup>4</sup> A redlining map of Atlanta created in 1938 by the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) demonstrates how neighborhoods to the west and south of downtown were categorized as "grade D" and represented in red. Grade D was assigned to non-white and high renter neighborhoods and indicated risky or dangerous areas to for granting loans or investing in property.

<sup>5</sup> This concept is based on John Locke's argument that land could be expropriated from its owner if he/she uses land inefficiently or inappropriately.

urban green space processes and exclusions to portray a more complex representation of the neighborhoods and place in relation to the Beltline.

Considering academic or informational articles about the Beltline are predominantly written by white males, my positionality as a Latina researcher who has experienced discrimination based on my ascribed characteristics and who is highly aware of “minority” underrepresentation in academic and political contexts, motivates me to include participants of various backgrounds who have been historically excluded. Participants of color were more willing to share their experiences with me compared to white participants. For example, interviews with residents of color lasted longer and revealed the everyday struggles with racialized places and histories. On the other hand, my sociodemographic factors predominantly place me as an outsider. Compared to a researcher who is older, has more experience, and lives in Atlanta, participants may not have revealed certain experiences that would reinforce validity. Moreover, people often underestimate my age based on my appearance, which combined with my residency, positions me as an unaware outsider, reinforces power dynamics associated with age, and contributes to “inauthentic” responses.

I integrated three main data collection methods within my study:(1) Participant observations during volunteer work at an urban farm, Trees Atlanta, and with the Housing Justice League; participating in ABI-hosted public events (walk and bike tours on the Eastside/ Westside trails, fitness classes, festivals, subcommittee meetings, informational meetings, study groups); attending neighborhood association meetings; and visiting neighborhoods and parks surrounding the Westside and Eastside Trails. Participant observations demonstrated that although both trails contribute to the Beltline



loop, their built environments and usage patterns are very different, reflecting their contrasting histories of development, racial segregation, and socio-demographic changes. During my first three weeks of participant observations of Beltline parks and trails, I interacted with individuals or advertisements that revealed other potential participants and sites. I perused ABI's website and Instagram to learn about particular events or meetings. Attending ABI-hosted events facilitated observations of interactions among Beltline officials and attendees, the influence of setting and context, the role of participants, and participant demographics. (2) I used snowball/ chain sampling during my thesis fieldwork to gain access to neighborhood events or residents to which I did not have access prior to speaking with particular community leaders. Neighborhood association leaders directed me to other residents who would be willing to participate in my study or to neighborhood events where I was able to recruit participants. I conducted interviews of neighborhood association leaders living in East, West, Southwest, and South Atlanta because these individuals are involved with broader city affairs and are particularly informed about issues impacting their communities. (3) Beltline-published materials, the formal CEF document, Beltline social media posts (Facebook and Instagram), public art, and local news sources served as the main documents for data collection. These documents revealed possible barriers to participation (i.e. time and location of meetings inaccessible to individuals with no transportation or who work during the slotted time; type of participation expected of attendees, etc.) and the particular narrative about the Beltline that ABI or its proponents are reinforcing.

To understand the varied impacts of the Beltline project, my study examines the Beltline's Eastside (Figure 1.1) and Westside Trail (Figure 1.2). Using histories of place

to interrogate green development in Atlanta has revealed the complex ways prior boundaries and senses of place become rearticulated in relation to the Beltline and associated green projects. At the beginning of my study, I assumed the Beltline would be central to the articulation of community and identity for residents living near its trails. What my research suggests, however, is that there are in fact multiple Beltlines whose definitions reflect broader histories of exclusion, alternative place-making narratives, and social/ geographical position within the city. For some, the Beltline is profitable or instrumental in “connecting” the city and transforming it into a legitimate “green” city. For others, the Beltline triggers anxiety over displacement and erasure of neighborhood identity. And for still others, the Beltline is irrelevant to their daily lives. Narratives that the Beltline will unite neighborhoods under one vision and into one cohesive community expressed in the opening quote glosses over the multiple visions and multiple meanings and expressions of community associated with Beltline connected neighborhoods. It assumes that unification and cohesion is possible without indicating how such a vision reinforces exclusivity or how the past can be reconciled without acknowledging the lingering racialized elements of history in green space development, housing, and conceptions of belonging. During fieldwork, Atlanta was often referred to as a tale of two cities, signaling a racial divide between black and white. Although legal segregation is relegated to its past, this racial divide permeates Atlanta’s discursive formations and materiality, shaping responses to issues such as education, housing, transportation, and environment.

The Beltline’s promotional slogan, *Where Atlanta Comes Together*, thus, is equally illusory: Which Atlantans are coming together, and which Atlantans are pushed

out/ driven apart? For residents in historically white neighborhoods who rarely ventured out of its boundaries prior to the Beltline due to a perceived sense of danger, the Beltline is uniting an affluent and whiter Atlanta. For residents living in historically African American neighborhoods long neglected by the city, the Beltline triggers reminders of racial oppression and denial of the right to the city as it threatens to eliminate “the historical aspect of these communities,” as one South Atlanta resident commented. Recognizing that the “Beltline is changing the core dynamic of Atlanta,” the structure and presentation of my study’s data acknowledges and reflects the existence of multiple Beltlines. Rather than to implicate individuals or entities as intentionally exclusive or racist, assign blame, or perpetuate the notions of oppressed, powerless communities of color resisting against white oppressors, my intention is to attend to the narratives of place that are informed by each individual’s positionality and subjectivity, and to examine how these narratives are represented and articulated. I discuss experiences and individuals in subsequent chapters moving geographically from West/Southwest Atlanta to East Atlanta; chapters two and eight unite these areas. This organization attempts to demonstrate the Beltline’s complex spatial dynamics that intersect with contentious histories, political agency, representation, memory, and place as both a concept and material object.

Subsequent chapters illustrate the complex spatial, social, and material dynamics intersecting with place. Chapters two discusses the meanings attributed to place in the form of visual representations (public art and landscapes) and contradictions in past, present, and future geographical imaginaries. Chapters three, four, five, and six explores the contested meanings of place by focusing on Aluma Farm, the Westside Trail,

Housing Justice League, and resident perspectives. Chapter seven describes my personal experiences with the Eastside Trail and interactions with Atlantans. Finally, chapter eight serves as a conclusion by explaining the dominant perspectives and narratives propagated by ABI, which contextualizes the importance of this thesis.

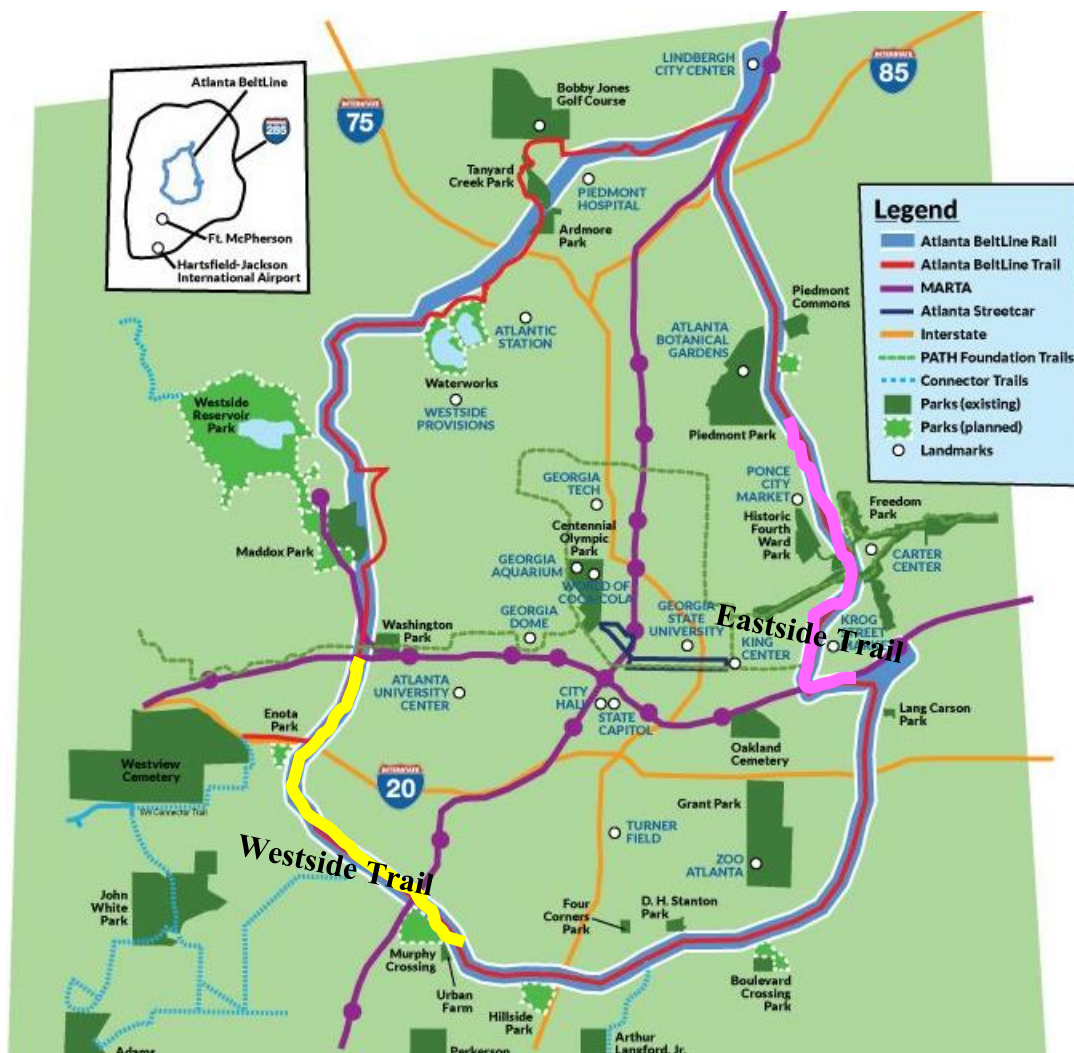


Figure 1.1 Beltline Loop Map (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., n.d.)



Figure 1.2 Westside Trail Map Overview (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., n.d.)

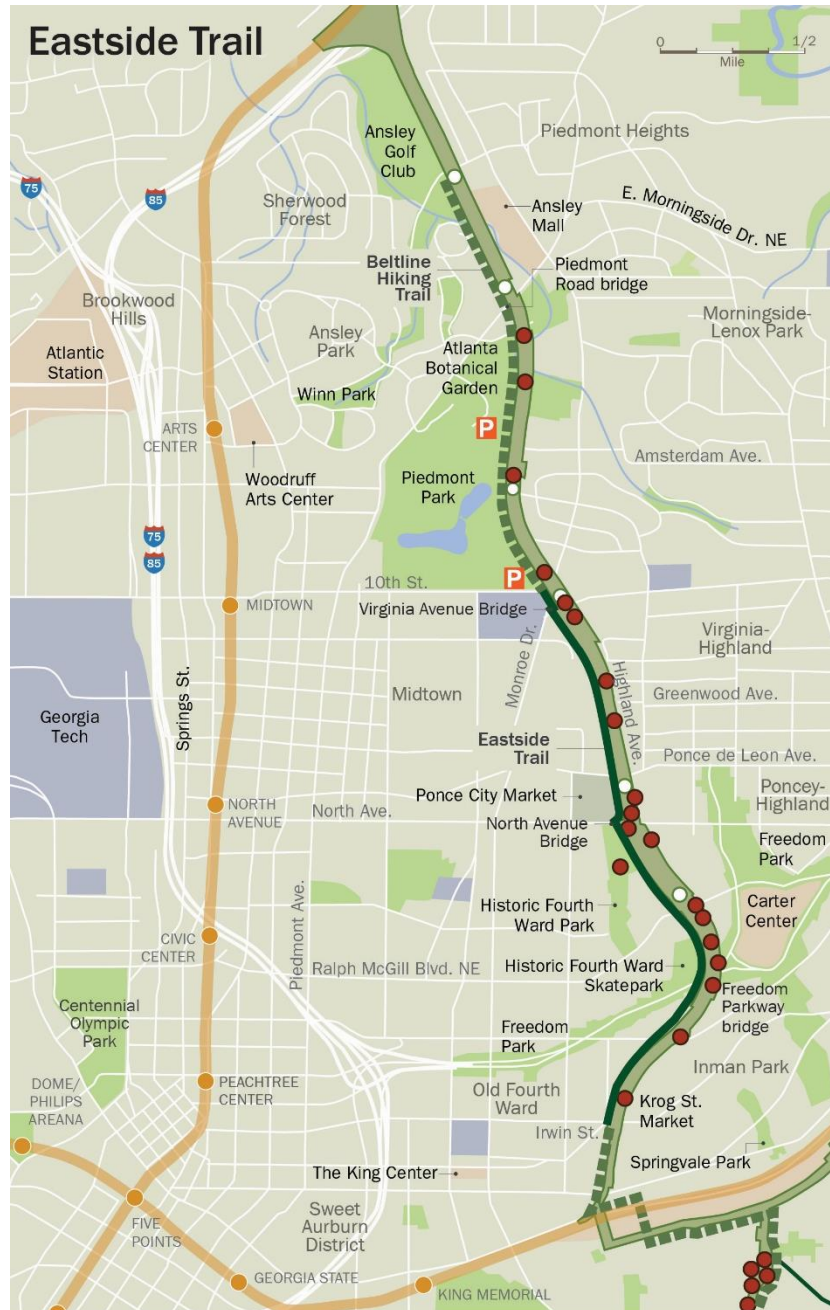


Figure 1.3 Eastside Trail Map Overview (Holman, 2015)



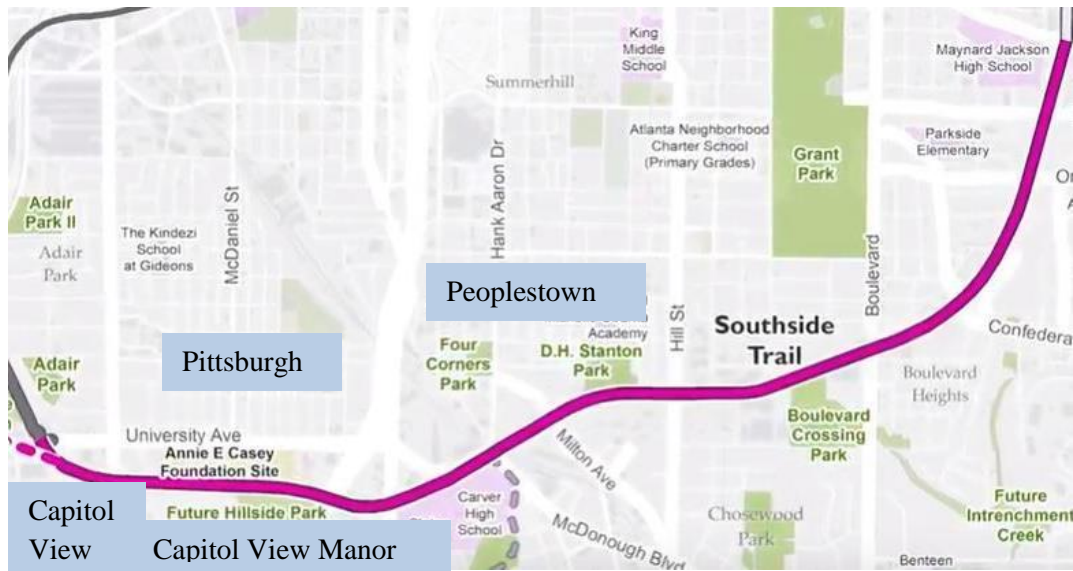


Figure 1.4 Southside Trail Map Overview (Johnson, 2019)



## CHAPTER 2

### MEANINGS AND REPRESENTATIONS EMBODIED IN SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

“Honoring the nation’s civil rights leadership right here on the Atlanta BeltLine is so fitting considering that many of the movement’s leaders lived in BeltLine neighborhoods...We are committed to using our public art program to celebrate and highlight the history and unique culture of our neighborhoods – it is this culture that makes Atlanta great.” Brian P. McGowan, former president and CEO of the Atlanta Beltline, Inc. (Ritter, 2018).

#### **2.1 NEIGHBORHOOD MURALS AND BANNERS**

As the quote above demonstrates, the Beltline intends to align the past with the future, distinguishing it from other developments that have favored erasure of the past to make way for the new in the process of redefining the city. As such, there are few historic buildings in Atlanta while the histories of neighborhoods have generally long been ignored, except meanings ascribed in names or images. Rather than overwriting neighborhood history, however, the Beltline plans to build upon them. This section explores how neighborhood murals, banners, and street names invoke certain memories of the past while excluding other narratives as well as how memories are contested as these material processes attempt to redefine communities. Murals, banners, and street names are visual forms among many that infuse place with specific images of representation and meaning.

The West End neighborhood (formerly Whitehall), founded in 1835 as a streetcar suburb, is situated three miles southwest of downtown Atlanta near the Westside Trail (Figure 2.1). The neighborhood is currently experiencing gentrification due partly to announcements of the Beltline (Henkin et al., n.d.). *Out of the Blocks*, a Baltimore-based podcast that seeks to capture multiple voices and streets of cities throughout the U.S., frequently discusses a neighborhood's history in relation to its current dynamics. In summer 2018, *Out of the Blocks* showcased West End, tracing the area's gentrification to the genocide of Native Americans and enslavement of African Americans through interviews of thirteen West End residents. One featured resident discussed the "many realities going on in the same space," referring to one intersection traversing the neighborhood (Ralph David Abernathy and Lee Street) as "the worst end of West End," and contrasting this to the intersection's south: "straight down [there] are some really fabulous houses. Here, the white one, that just sold for a half a million dollars, so ten minutes away from the corner, people living on the edge, and then at the other extreme you have this" (Henkin et al., 2018). Lee Street is named after Robert Lee, a Confederate general from the South (not Robert E. Lee but another southern general) while Ralph David Abernathy Blvd. honors Dr. Martin Luther King's "second-in-command for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference" (Henkin et al., 2018). West End was initially home to the "upper white class," but it became predominantly African American in the late 1960s (West End Neighborhood Development, 2014). According to West End Neighborhood Development's (WEND) website, the Beltline serves a central role in positively changing the community, referred to as a "renaissance" after the area

experienced mass foreclosures in the late 1990s and early 2000s, leading to disinvestment and decline (WEND, 2014).

This intersection exemplifies Doreen Massey's (1995) argument about the connection between past and present inherent in street names: "It is not just that a world is 'maintained' in the names of old streets. It is also that a (historical) world is created. If the past transforms the present, helps thereby to make it, so too does the present make the past" (187). Derek Alderman and Joshua Inwood (2018) add that naming practices always involves struggle because toponyms constitute the politics of belonging as "sites for battles to widen 'the distribution of citizenship' and the use of space" (256).

*Blocks of Culture*, (Figure 2.2) a banner created in 2000, signposts the neighborhood and informs visitors they are in Historic West End. The banner's design features ten blocks of various sizes and colors, representing the neighborhood's cultural, religious, architectural, educational, and business diversity (WEND, 2016). In my visits to West End, I noticed this banner hanging prominently adjacent to front doors of several but not all houses. Additionally, WEND's website identifies the neighborhood as "a unique urban community that brings together... southern hospitality, old-fashioned neighborliness and a strong historic identity" (WEND, 2014). "Old-fashioned" and "historic" descriptors invoke nostalgia and tradition, overlooking West End's history involving struggles with racial segregation and community disinvestment, challenging the implications of southern hospitality or neighborliness. This description defines place with a unifying and singular set of characteristics. However, as West End residents featured in the *Out of the Blocks* podcast confirm, the meaning of place is dependent on one's interpretation of the past, which, as Massey makes clear, shapes one's interpretation for a

place's present and future. For instance in the podcast, Kerri, who grew up in the neighborhood, possesses a strong sense of place for West End that has motivated her to remain, though since she was an unmarried African American woman, obtaining a loan to purchase a home was a challenge to remaining in the neighborhood during the late 1960s. Additionally, Gallery 992 on Ralph David Abernathy perceives West End as “the last best-kept secret in Atlanta” and “[the gallery] [as] ground zero. The apex. The present...the past...and the Future”(Gallery 992, n.d.). Jeff, a Gallery 992 employee who was also featured in the podcast, describes it as “a definite communal space” where the doors are always open and where “music breaks up “trial[s] or tribulation[s] on [people’s] mind[s]” (Henkin et al. 2018).

Considering the vast meanings and memories of place, then, a mural is a medium through which some of these narratives gain a material presence. Artists, who play a role in place-making, choose how to represent/ claim a certain place/space based on their embodied experiences that have shaped sense of place. In other words, murals illustrate the intersection of place meaning, identity, and history, yet they are often full of contradictions. Two particular West End murals, *Greetings from West End* and *West End Remembers*, reveal the contradictions in place memory and representation. Stream Realty Partners initiated Lee + White as a redevelopment project of a 23-acre industrial site. In 2017, as redevelopment efforts were rising, Lee + White’s management team contacted Greetings Tour to create a mural (Stream, 2016). The *Greetings from West End* (Figure 2.3) design incorporates imagery of Atlanta within the letters spelling “West End.” While intended to promote local identity, *Greetings from West End* only features one image associated with West End out of seven letters-the *Blocks of Culture* design within the

letter “N.” The other six letters are associated with imagery of Fox Theatre, Georgia Peaches, Atlanta’s 1996 Olympic Bridge, Midtown, Georgia Aquarium, and Dr. King.<sup>6</sup> None of these remaining letters are part of West End but invoke racialized histories (except Georgia Aquarium).<sup>7</sup>

Located to the Eastside Trail’s west (refer to Figure 1.1), Midtown (letter “D”) borders the Georgia Institute of Technology and features expensive high-rise apartments; Fox Theatre (letter “W”) is situated in Midtown. Fox Theatre and Midtown invoke economic exclusion as tickets to the theatre range from \$50 to \$125 and housing in Midtown is inaccessible to many with condos (one bedroom, one bath) starting at \$145,000 to \$550,000 (Zillow, 2019). Fox Theatre’s architecture remains as a powerful reminder of Jim Crow; seating partitions that separated African Americans from whites and the theatre’s separate entrance for African Americans (Figure 2.4) are preserved in time (Jean-Laurent, 2014). Atlanta’s 1996 Olympic Bridge/Cauldron Tower (Figure 2.5), located over Capitol Avenue to the south of downtown in the Summerhill neighborhood, may trigger negative memories of displacement as the city launched its new wave of urban renewal in preparation of the 1996 Olympics, such as the demolition of public housing and implementation of policy criminalizing homelessness to remove “undesirables” from Atlanta’s streets (Gustafson, 2013). Peaches (letter “T”) have long been an icon associated with Georgia. This iconography was the result of concerted efforts by growers to “tell the story of the peach” through dramatized festivals in 1922 to 1926; in actuality, peaches comprise 0.38% of Georgia’s agricultural economy, which has

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<sup>6</sup> Homage to King (first letter “E”) is a sculpture in O4W, which is Dr. King’s birthplace.

<sup>7</sup> Georgia Aquarium is in downtown Atlanta and opened to the public in November 2005. Approximately 60% of aquarium visitors travel from outside of Georgia (Fisher, 2016).

long relied on the manual labor of slaves and immigrants (Okie, 2017). In sum, *Greetings from West End* attempts to define Atlanta's identity using tourist destinations or seemingly neutral historical landmarks that supersede representations of multiple histories and meanings.

*West End Remembers* (Figure 2.6), on the other hand, located 350 meters from *Greetings from West End*, and portrays West End's identity with images of specific histories relevant to the area. A Native American woman sits on the mural's bottom left, referencing the presence of Native Americans and the area's initial gentrification. Wren's Nest and Hammonds House Museum are located toward the mural's right. Wren's Nest is a museum in the former home of Joel Chandler Harris, a Georgia writer, who befriended slaves in nearby plantations and preserved/popularized African folktales (The Wren's Nest, n.d.). Hammonds House Museum is a gallery in the former home of Dr. Otis Thrash Hammonds, an African American physician, and "a mecca for people seeking inspiration, interaction, and intellectual stimulation centered on art of the African Diaspora" (Hammonds House Museum, 2018). Toward the top middle of the mural, an African American woman and a white man carry houses in their hands as if attempting to position them within an existing community. This may be interpreted in at least two ways: the placement of these homes depicts competing claims to belonging that have historically shaped West End, or it may refer to the possibilities of West End's future in which multiple claims to belonging are accommodated. In contrast to *Greetings from West End*, *West End Remembers* acknowledges a contested racialized past of enslavement and dispossession that are specific to the neighborhood.

## 2.2 RAILS, TRAILS, AND STREETS

Much of the former rails traversing Atlanta that were converted into Beltline trails once served as physical barriers of racial segregation. While not unique to Atlanta, this is critical to understanding who the Beltline is now connecting and who it is disconnecting. This is most apparent with the Eastside Trail, which divides Old Fourth Ward, a historically African American neighborhood, from Inman Park, a historically white neighborhood.

Located two miles from downtown, Inman Park was the “first planned residential suburb...and electric trolley neighborhood” in Atlanta. The neighborhood was inspired by Fredrick Law Olmsted’s park-like neighborhoods in the 1880s (Inman Park Neighborhood Association, 2016). Since its development, Inman Park attracted “Atlanta’s nineteenth-century elite”<sup>8</sup> and continues to feature “beautiful homes filled with professionals who appreciate the charm of urban living in a bucolic setting” as there are several “well-maintained” green spaces throughout the neighborhood (IPNA, 2016). In 1970, Ken Thompson, a resident, designed Inman Park’s neighborhood logo (Figure 2.8), which is a yellow and black butterfly; two faces looking in opposite directions appear in the butterfly’s wings. The face on the left wing symbolizes the neighborhood’s past; the right wing’s face symbolizes Inman Park’s future. This logo served as a “unifying symbol” of the “spirit” of “restoration pioneers” who were updating homes during the 1970s; appearing on banners and flags in the front façade of homes (Figure 2.9), the logo today is a “symbol for the continuing evolution of the Inman Park

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<sup>8</sup> The establishment of Inman Park as the home of affluent social elites was guaranteed by deed restrictions, such as land was for residential use only and every residence was required to be worth \$3,000 or more (Marr & Jones, 2008)

neighborhood” (IPNA, 2016).<sup>9</sup> Although there are a few affluent African American families living in Inman Park, the neighborhood remains predominantly affluent and white.

In contrast to Inman Park, Old Fourth Ward was a community reserved for African Americans due to its low elevation. Prone to flooding, residents lacked appropriate access to electricity and paved roads well into the 1960s (Pendergrast, 2017). The neighborhood changed as white individuals began returning to the city in the late 1990s. However, gentrification skyrocketed in the early 2000s from the anticipation of the Beltline (Immergluck, 2009). The most recent quantitative data examines changes in median home prices from 2011 to 2015; median house prices near the Eastside Trail increased by 41-51 percent (Immergluck, 2017).<sup>10</sup>

Analogous to West End, Old Fourth Ward features two contradictory murals that reveal competing claims to space, *Old Fourth Ward* and *I am Somebody*. William Mitchell, a “community-chosen artist,” created the *Old Fourth Ward* (Figure 2.10) mural in 2015, on a retaining wall in the southwest corner of the neighborhood (Old Fourth Ward Business Association, 2015). On the far left of *Old Fourth Ward*, logos of Fourth Ward Alliance and Old Fourth Ward Business Association (O4WBA) appear on the mural’s far left side; a black cat and bottom half of a yellow circle are on the far right while “Old Fourth Ward” is written in block font in the middle. Aside from the neighborhood name, the mural does not appear to promote any particular view of “local”

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly to other urban neighborhoods in the U.S, Inman Park experienced a period of neglect during the 1950s and 60s, yet it quickly recovered (unlike other Atlanta neighborhoods) because by the 1980s, home prices were steadily increasing due to resident-led restoration (Pendergrast, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Victorian homes in Inman Park can sell for more than \$1 million (Pendergrast, 2017).



symbolism. Unlike other references to Old Fourth Ward, the mural excludes dogwood blossoms even though these flowers are one of Old Fourth Ward's longstanding symbols and are displayed on facades of local businesses or as neighborhood banners in resident homes (Figure 2.11 and 2.12).

Inspired by *Old Fourth Ward*, muralist Cara Turano Snow proceeded to create a similar mural that would welcome visitors who enter Old Fourth Ward from further south of Ponce de Leon Avenue. In 2017, Snow and neighbors painted *I am Somebody* onto a retaining wall (Figure 2.13). Snow hoped to “inspire a conversation” by designing the mural using “local” and familiar symbols unique to Old Fourth Ward, including dogwood blossoms (Kelley, 2017). Whereas *Old 4<sup>th</sup> Ward* was community funded, *I am Somebody* began from one private citizen's efforts but soon transformed into a collaboration where neighbors' ideas were incorporated into the mural. *I am Somebody* refers to the title of Reverend William Holmes Borders, Sr.'s 1947 poem/sermon (Kelley, 2017) in which he memorializes influential African Americans in various disciplines to invoke pride in African American identity (Wiggins, Jr., 2008). An orange-yellow sky surrounding Atlanta's skyline is most likely alluding to the “Great Fire of 1917,” an 11-hour fire that destroyed fifty blocks of Old Fourth Ward (Godwin, 2017). *I am Somebody* invokes particular imagery shared among neighbors living on Old Fourth Ward's southern border that includes dogwood blossoms, an influential pastor who served in a Baptist church close to the mural's location, and the disproportionate impact of the “Great Fire” on the neighborhood's western and southern boundaries.

Considering the area's racial segregation, current demographic changes, and histories of disinvestment, *I am Somebody* speaks broadly to a determination to interrupt

current reproductions of historical marginalization of African Americans while the incorporation of particular elements comprising “local” identity indicates to the mural’s viewers that Old Fourth Ward extends beyond the area directly surrounding the Eastside Trail.

The O4WBA’s website recently sought proposals for a new Old Fourth Ward banner design. Current flags/banners feature a white dogwood blossom, so the advertisement suggested the exclusion of dogwood flowers. According to Smith, O4WBA’s executive director, “some feel that the design is a bit tired and more importantly doesn’t adequately represent [Old Fourth Ward] -- it’s generic” (Smith, 2018). I am not aware of the histories or meanings underlying the dogwood flower as there are no resources readily available to reveal this information. However, the different perceptions regarding the dogwood flower’s importance demonstrate how individuals living in the same neighborhood occupy different geographical and social positions and possess various (often competing) memories of place. For example, *Old Fourth Ward* is located among newly-constructed housing near Ponce City Market, which is yet another landmark provoking conflicting definitions of “local.” It may suggest a general erasure of histories or “local” meanings usually accompanying gentrifying neighborhoods, possibly explaining O4WBA’s eagerness to replace the “generic” and outdated banner design. Erasure and replacement (*Old Fourth Ward* and attitudes toward neighborhood banner designs) versus shared memories and preservation (*I am Somebody*) exemplifies “relationship[s] between past, present, in future” that “conceptualize geographical places...as set in time as well as space” (Massey, 1995: 186). Shared memories of the past, or lack thereof among newcomers, current experiences as residents informed by

one's past, and orientations toward the future regarding neighborhood identity between North Avenue and Irwin/Hilliard residents.

Old Fourth Ward is divided into four quadrants. Old Fourth Ward's boundaries and areas comprising it are arbitrary, both ideologically and materially to Atlantans; people possess different understandings of the neighborhood (Andy Johnson, 2015). Google Maps, for instance, excludes the intersection where *I am Somebody* is situated, designating this intersection to the Sweet Auburn neighborhood. Old Fourth Ward Business Association, on the other hand, provides a detailed map of the neighborhood (Figure 2.14) that includes the intersection omitted by Google. In conversations with two neighborhood association members and with others familiar with Atlanta, Old Fourth Ward's quadrants omitted while a significant neighborhood in African American history, Sweet Auburn, was envisioned as separate. These conversations instead consisted of explanations about Old Fourth Ward as a historical African American neighborhood, its gentrification, and referred to the parts of Old Fourth Ward in proximity to the trail.

In various conceptualizations of Old Fourth Ward, exclusions of certain sections centered around a street named Boulevard that traverses the neighborhood. Notorious for crime and poor housing in the span of several decades and envisioned by the city as a "problem corridor" (Pendergrast, 2017), Boulevard <sup>11</sup> is a North/South thoroughfare farther west from the Eastside Trail that has remained "out of place," or excluded from discourse about Old Fourth Ward. Bedford Pine is a section eight housing complex located along Boulevard usually referred to as "a sketchy neighborhood" (Pendergrast,

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<sup>11</sup> By 1906, the street had been renamed from Jefferson Street to Boulevard (Emory University, 2013).

2017). A white middle-aged Old Fourth Ward resident I interviewed, who is on the board of a non-profit organization that focuses on providing support to Bedford Pine, did not define the community as a component of Old Fourth Ward. Instead, she depicted Bedford Pine and its residents as hopeless, victims to poverty, fragmented families, and addicted to drugs. To counteract negative connotations associated with Bedford Pine, a resident featured in a book about the Beltline expressed, “We have mediocre, meaningless jobs to the rest of the world... We are the bottom-of-the-barrel people, but we mean something to each other. We might not mean nothing to the rest of the world, because the rest of the world is flying by us” (Pendergrast, 2017: 179). Here, the static view of Boulevard and Bedford Pine has contributed to their ambiguous designation as comprising Old Fourth Ward on maps but nonetheless “out of place.” This out-of-placeness has contributed to the marginality of Boulevard and Bedford Pine and facilitated the erasure of their histories as the next targets of “urban revitalization.” Out of ten homes/condos along Boulevard listed for sale on Zillow in March 2019, there is an equal number of units that included Old Fourth Ward in their description and those that do not. Units on the section of Boulevard approaching Ponce de Leon Avenue toward Ponce City Market are the five that describe its location in Old Fourth Ward; additional signifiers, such as “Hot Old Fourth Ward” or “Atlanta’s hottest neighborhood,” typically embellish these units. These units are also the most expensive (\$470,000-899,000). Units farther south from Ponce City Market do not identify themselves as Old Fourth Ward, though two units specify they are within walking distance to the Beltline and Inman Park; average prices for a two bed, two bath ranges from \$229,000 to \$375,000. Homes/condos/townhomes for sale a

few feet from the Eastside Trail attaches “historic” as an adjective to describe Old Fourth Ward.

Street names maintain certain historical worlds, which are usually the dominant and hegemonic views of history (Massey, 1995). In the 1920s, Ponce de Leon Avenue, one of Atlanta’s major thoroughfares, demarcated a line separating African American neighborhoods to its south and white neighborhoods to its north (Pendergrast, 2017). Monroe Drive becomes Boulevard once it crosses south through Ponce de Leon Avenue, a remnant of Atlanta’s physical methods of reinforcing segregation that, although obscured, nonetheless influences surrounding communities today similarly to the past. As contemporary narratives of place are contested and reimagined, places are remade. Murals, street names, symbols, descriptors of place suggest that the Beltline is not the primary driver of the remaking of neighborhoods it surrounds, rather its material presence implicates the role it plays in amplifying specific narratives of place that reimagine the past in sanitized ways.

Beyond street names and symbolism, Massey argues “words, language, names” influence the presence of the past in resonance, “whether actually from the past or reinserted as a self-conscious building-in of ‘local character’” (1995: 187). Businesses and condos located around sections of the Eastside Trail near Ponce de Leon Avenue illustrate Massey’s point. Ponce de Leon Avenue once catered to wealthy Atlantans and light industrial and commercial uses, but soon transformed into a “notorious [location] for drugs, panhandlers, and prostitutes” (Pendergrast, 2017: 176). Ponce City Market and Paris on Ponce (a store that sells art and “vintage” furniture or décor) represent the power of names in reinserting romanticized views of the past. Incorporating “Ponce” in business

names is intended to promote “locality,” or connection to broader influences in Paris on Ponce’s case, considering these businesses are located along Ponce de Leon Avenue, yet they overlook Ponce de Leon’s historical influence in reinforcing class/racial inequality and recent period of decline. Ironically, these two businesses replicate classism similarly to how former businesses on Ponce did in the past because they both cater to high-income consumers. It is apparent, given the historical and contemporary patterns of development, that the replication of a certain historical world in which race and class exacerbate unequal housing and neighborhood conditions may be traced back to seemingly irrelevant factors such as street names.<sup>12</sup>

Defining, representing, and articulating place are contentious processes that rely on power, memory, embodied experiences, and broader accepted narratives. This section has explored the ways individuals claim space through symbolism on neighborhood murals, neighborhood banners, map boundaries, and street/business names. In the subsequent section, I further complicate the role of symbols and images within place-making by focusing on public street art<sup>13</sup> as forms of opposition and articulation of belonging.

### **2.3 PUBLIC ART ON THE TRAILS**

Atlanta, like other cities, has a contentious history (Blinder, 2017; Wheatley, 2010) related to the ambiguous differentiation of graffiti from public art, leading to the former’s condemnation and the latter’s (regulated) legitimization in public spaces. There

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<sup>12</sup> A one bedroom/one bath condo located on Boulevard may sell for approximately \$134,000 while a condo located on North Highland Avenue in similar condition may sell for \$299,900.

<sup>13</sup> I use the term “public street art” to encompass various artistic methods (tags, graffiti, stencils, stickers, murals), acknowledging that this term includes other methods.

have been recent changes in perceptions of what constitutes and public art’s “evol[ution] into a fully developed art movement;” in fact, public art now is instrumental to a city’s “place branding” agenda (Andron, 2018: 1040). Attitudes toward graffiti have taken a 180-degree turn, shifting from a disturbance in order, “matter out of place” to belonging in (designated) space (Cresswell, 1996). Despite these changes, public art that is “out of place” still invokes concerns over disorder; unequal relations of power continue to shape which art “belongs” and thus sanctioned as well as which art is out of place and thus denounced (Andron, 2018).

In 2010, Art on the Atlanta Beltline, with the goal of “mak[ing] art accessible to all” (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., n.d.-a), emerged as an art exhibition, featuring work by various artists and multiple mediums (mural, theatre, dance, sculpture, photography). Signs providing the piece’s title, a brief description, and the artist’s name,<sup>14</sup> typically accompany each artwork. Art on the Atlanta Beltline -supported artwork typically extends for seven miles on both the Eastside and Westside trails. Karcheik Sims-Alvarado’s *Atlanta and the Civil Rights Movement, 1944-1968* (Figure 2.15) was the latest exhibition, tracing Atlanta’s role in the Civil Rights Movement and narrating the “struggle, fortitude, and organizational strength of a people” involved in this movement (Ritter, 2018). Installed on both the West and Eastside Trails, Atlanta and the Civil Rights Movement is an example of one of the wide range of forms and messages that Art on the Atlanta Beltline art embodies. In this case, Atlanta and the Civil Rights Movement seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of the Civil Rights Movement that is

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<sup>14</sup> Artists who are interested in featuring their work on the Beltline are required to submit proposals.

usually propagated, exposing otherwise obscured histories of the city. These “local” histories are reflective of Atlanta rather than to the individual neighborhoods through which the exhibit traverses.

Linda Mitchell’s *Rainbow Pupper* (Figure 2.16) is an example of an Art on the Atlanta Beltline -artwork within a different medium and message. *Rainbow Pupper*, a mural featuring vertical multi-colored stripes with a stenciled dog holding a balloon, was “a symbol of [community cohesiveness;” the dog “symbolize[d] all humans and animals of all colors and cultures who coexist in harmony;” Mitchell intended to encourage a dialogue between the viewer and the “life-size fellow being, inviting compassion and acknowledgment” (Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2018). *Rainbow Pupper* replaced Mr. Never Satisfied’s (Never) 2011 Could be Better mural, which had become faded and tagged through the years (Figure 2.17). Shortly after its completion in mid-August, *Rainbow Pupper* became involved in a “turf war” when it was “defaced” (Figure 2.18) five days later and then again after the mural had been cleaned (Alexander, 2018). Located in Fourth Ward Skate Park on a vertical ramp facing the Eastside Trail, the past and present of the mural’s landscape are critical factors in explaining possible aggravations with *Rainbow Pupper*. In 2011, a skatepark sanctioned by the city was opened. Prior to the official acceptance of this skatepark, the site was a former “industrial parking lot and loading dock, which was commandeered by skaters in an outlaw occupation” (DeLoach, 2018). In September 2018, Never painted *Somethings Never Change* (Figure 2.19), which was undisturbed when I walked by early January. Both Mitchell and Never are Atlanta natives and Caucasian; however, Never had been a member of the skater community before the city-recognized skatepark was established. *Rainbow Pupper* symbolizes



community cohesiveness, compassion, and acknowledgment in a site where rapid gentrification and mass displacement have been occurring. *Somethings Never Change* and *Could be Better*, rather than assuming there is community cohesiveness, criticizes these changes. To describe *Somethings Never Change*, Never writes, “Out with the old, in with the new, and then back in with the old again. What used to be a graffiti and skate haven is now the epicenter of Atlanta’s Beltline induced gentrification...all the generic ‘live, work, play’ style condos that have drastically altered the dynamic of this place” (Mr. Never Satisfied, 2018).<sup>15</sup>

## **2.4 SPACES BEYOND CONTROL, SPACES OF EXTENDED CONTROL**

The emergence and temporality of public art on the Eastside and Westside Trail was a noticeable difference during my fieldwork. Particular spaces, as I will demonstrate, are designated for long-term artwork while others have shorter lifespans. These designations are unstated and just as arbitrary as the definition of approved public art. Multiple sites serve as spaces for messages of resistance, identity, politics, and neighborhood. As the “turf war” illustrates, the length of time certain pieces are visible before another artist paints over them varies.<sup>16</sup> The *Rainbow Pupper* debate also demonstrates that no single entity or individual possesses complete control over the Beltline’s spaces. In contrast, the Westside Trail has few spaces where new art may be seen. Public art on the Westside Trail show signs of weathering and peeling, indicating dated work with some exceptions. This summer, Art on the Atlanta Beltline attempted to

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<sup>15</sup> *Somethings Never Change* is not recognized in Art on the Atlanta Beltline’s website, unlike *Could be Better*, though the description for this mural was shorter than others.

<sup>16</sup> According to Art on the Atlanta Beltline, “the life average lifespan for a mural is three to five years” (DeLoach, 2018).

promote new artwork on the Westside Trail through events such as Family Paint Day, the Art. Movement. Film. Music Summer Fest, or the selection of muralists to paint the walls of the Lee Street SW underpass. The fact that the promotion and creation of public art on the Westside Trail have been recently controlled and managed by the Beltline whereas a significant proportion of art on the Eastside Trail seems to be separate from the Beltline is intriguing considering the changes in the valorization in public art. Thus, Lee Street SW's underpass will be the main site I explore for art spaces on the Westside Trail. Then, I will shift focus on the Eastside Trail's Freedom Parkway's underpass.

#### **WESTSIDE TRAIL: LEE STREET SW UNDERPASS**

*West End is the Standard* (Figure 2.20) and *TFB* (Figure 2.21) are pieces independent from Art on the Atlanta Beltline. An individual peeled off paint to expose *West End is the Standard* after it had been painted over. No name is associated with the piece, so I do not know the artist's intended message. However, the red, green, black, and gold most likely represents Pan-Africanism (Donnella, 2017; Sartwell, 2009), especially considering its location in a predominantly African American neighborhood--West End. Therefore, I interpret its significance as an expression of identity and political resistance against the area's current processes of gentrification. *TFB* depicts two skeletons; one holds a gun and the other a knife while both display hand signals; "TFB" is written in black letters, which may be an abbreviation of "too fucking bad" (Free Dictionary, n.d.). Considering the piece's location, symbols, and histories of West End, I interpret this piece as a contestation of reality versus imagined narratives. "TFB" alludes to the imposition of a racialized narrative that positions residents, specifically African

American men, living in Southwest Atlanta as criminals and dangerous, hence the two skeletons holding weapons and one carrying a bag over his shoulder.

*West End is the Standard* and *TFB* have been replaced by Art on the Atlanta Beltline -endorsed art during early August's Family Paint Day (Figure 2.22) and mural paintings. Both events occurred simultaneously because they were both a part of Beltline Walls; as shown in Figure 1.23, muralists are painting their pieces on the underpass's left side while families are painting their murals on the right. While Family Paint Day had positive intentions,<sup>17</sup> its material effects extend beyond the event to suppress certain expressions of resistance and belonging with images of anthropomorphized animals riding bikes and scooters. Such coordinated efforts have not occurred on the Eastside Trail. Some artist-activists participating in Beltline Walls, such as Charmaine Minniefield, however, incorporated references that speak to broader sociopolitical change. By depicting African American women leaders in her work, Minniefield "preserves cultural histories of communities affected by gentrification" (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., 2018b). *Honoring Carrie Steele, Keeper of Children* (Figure 2.23) honors Carrie Steele, a former slave and later a founder of Atlanta's first orphanage for African American children that remains in operation today (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., 2018). This mural is located on Lee Street's underpass opposite to Family Paint Day murals.

#### **EASTSIDE TRAIL: FREEDOM PARKWAY UNDERPASS**

Freedom Parkway's underpass is an alternative site where public art is continuously updated independently from Art on the Atlanta Beltline, ABI, and the City

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<sup>17</sup> Family Paint Day was co-hosted by Art on the Atlanta Beltline and Love Paint, a non-profit that strives to support children who have witnessed domestic violence.

of Atlanta.<sup>18</sup> The Freedom Parkway underpass is located a few feet away from Fourth Ward Skate Park with cement columns and steep-angled walls all covered in art. During field observations of Fourth Ward Skate Park, I often noticed individuals carrying professional cameras with long lenses taking pictures of art throughout the Freedom Parkway underpass or families posing in front of certain pieces as their background. Atlanta, then, exemplifies the commodification of street art as a component of branding the creative city. Frustrations over the Eastside's gentrification and resulting displacement is manifest in *Out of town yuppie* (Figure 2.24), which depicts a blue person shaking a finger to portray disappointment/disapproval with text that reads, "Out of town yuppie, have some respect..." In representing a blue person, the artist refrains from assigning race/ethnicity to individuals who see newcomers or outsiders as yuppies.<sup>19</sup> The person urges newcomers to leave while reprimanding them for contributing to displacement and neglecting the residents and meanings of place that existed prior to their arrival. A week in late July after the picture was taken, there had been attempts to render the upper text, "Out of town yuppie," illegible. By early August, the image had been painted over. Figure 2.25 illustrates the role of changing perceptions of public art and stereotypes surrounding public street artists, helping explain the differences between the East and Westside Trails; it is an image of a white individual speaking into a phone

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to Freedom Parkway's underpass, North Highland Avenue's underpass and Krog Street Tunnel located along the Eastside Trail, are alternative sites where public art is continuously updated independently from Art on the Atlanta Beltline, ABI, and the City of Atlanta.

<sup>19</sup> Yuppie (shortened word for young urban professional), "a young and well-educated city-dweller who has a professional career and an affluent lifestyle" (Dictionary.com, 2019) gained popularity in the 1980s; I have understood the term to be derogatory, but dictionary sources do not specifically mention this.

with a speech bubble that reads: “Hello Police! Nels is doing graffitis under Freedom PKWY. I don’t feel safe!” In the piece, a white individual calls the police to report Nels Loks, an African American Atlantan artist, with concerns over personal safety as justification for the call in a place (Freedom Parkway) known for its graffiti. Since the work of African American street artists has typically been stigmatized and associated with crime,<sup>20</sup> perhaps this stigmatization explains why newer street art has not appeared on the Westside Trail, which surrounds predominantly African American neighborhoods. When I walked around the trails, I only noticed white individuals spray painting new pieces during the day.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I ventured into the first phase of the Eastside’s Trail’s extension south of Irwin Street that was completed in October 2017. To my left, stood a group of buildings (ABP’s new offices, Trees Atlanta, among others) to my right, a line of chain link fence blocked off a construction site of Studioplex, a mixed-use residence complex. Studioplex advertisements (Figure 2.26) were dispersed and tied to the link fence. This is where I first noticed the “done” tag. Subsequent trail observations confirmed that the tag was only written on advertisements of new developments on the Eastside Trail. For example, an advertisement promoting New City (Figure 2.27), a developer currently constructing 725 Ponce (mixed-use residence), in front of Ponce City Market, also displays “done” written in the same style. The intentional placement of this tag on development advertisements emphasizes the artist’s disagreement with the type of development that is dominating the Eastside Trail.

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on the history and types of street art, see Ross (2016).

Place valorization, “the process whereby...places...are bestowed a certain value” is useful when thinking about the desirability of street art and graffiti as markers of creative urban neighborhoods. This theme of place valorization is also helpful in connecting imaginaries of place as in need of “improvement” and the indicators of such processes.



Figure 2.1 West and Southwest Atlanta Map (Martinez, 2019)



Figure 2.2 *Blocks of Culture* West End Neighborhood Banner  
(“Blocks of Culture,” 2016)

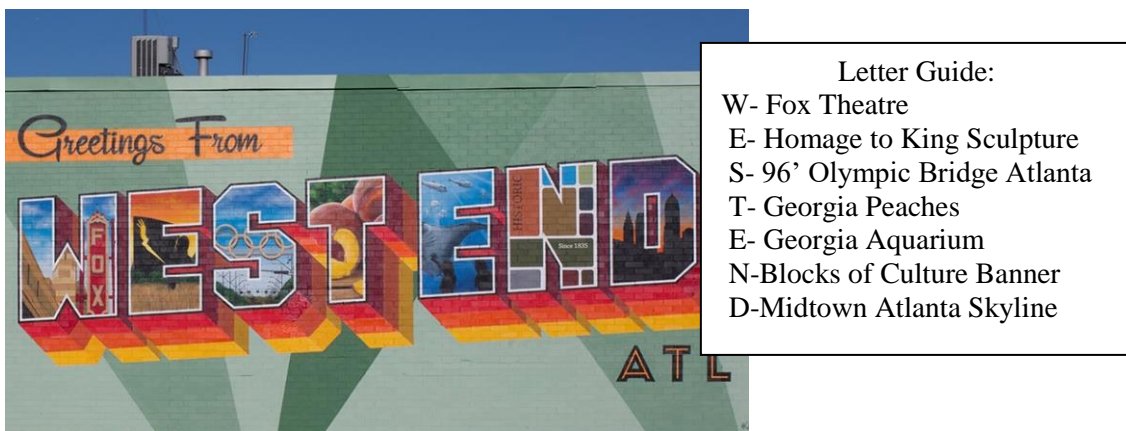


Figure 2.3 *Greetings from West End* Mural on Lee + White Property (Sauer, 2017)





Figure 2.4 Former Entrance for African Americans to Fox Theatre (Annabella Jean-Laurent, 2014).



Figure 2.5 1996 Olympic Games Bridge on Capitol Avenue (Lesser, n.d.)



Figure 2.6 *West End Remembers*, Malaika Favorite (Atlanta Beltline Inc., n.d.)

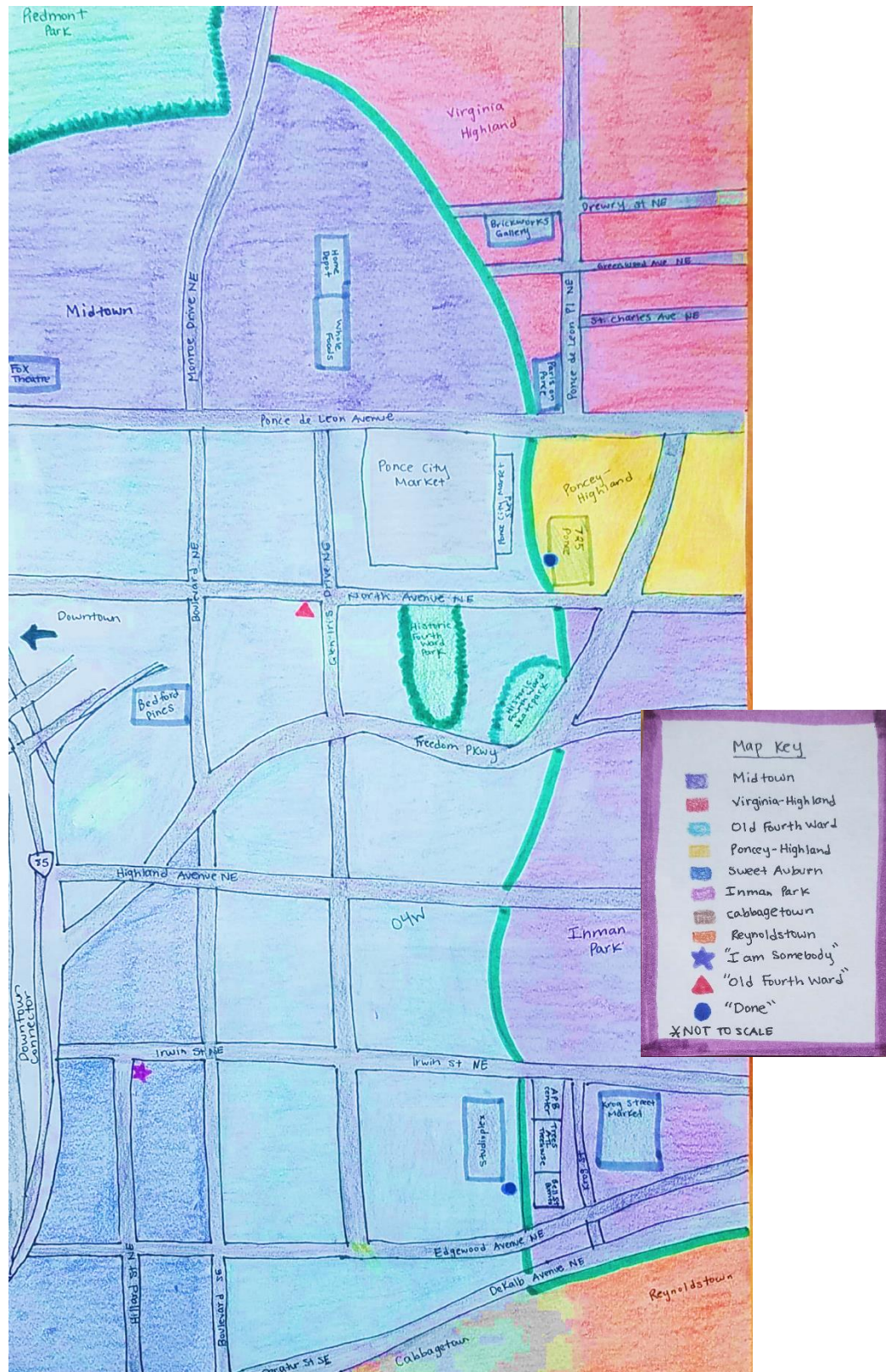


Figure 2.7 East Atlanta Map (Martinez, 2019)





Figure 2.8 Inman Park Butterfly (Inman Park Neighborhood Association)



Figure 2.9 Inman Park Butterfly Banner (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 2.10 *Old 4<sup>th</sup> Ward*, William Michell. Mural (O4WBA, 2015)



Figure 2.11 O4W Logo and Dogwood Flowers on Yoga Works façade (Martinez, 2018)

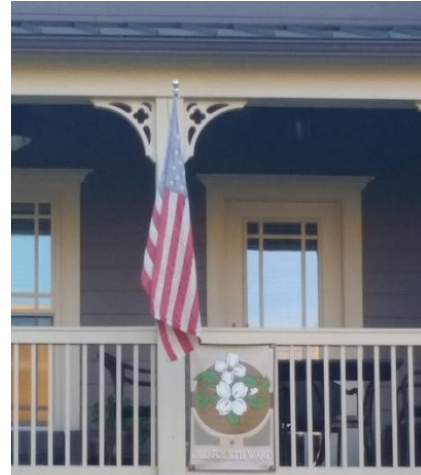


Figure 2.12 O4W Banner (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 2.13 *I am Somebody*, Cara Turano Snow Mural (Kelley, 2017)





Figure 2.14 Old Fourth Ward Sections Map (O4WBA, 2012)



Figure 2.15 *Atlanta and the Civil Rights Movement, 1944-1968*, Karcheik Sims-Alvarado (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., 2018)



Figure 2.16 *Rainbow Pupper*, Linda Mitchell (DeLoach, 2018)



Figure 2.17 *Could be Better*, Mr. Never Satisfied aka “Never” (DeLoach, 2018)



Figure 2.18 “Defaced” *Rainbow Pupper* (DeLoach, 2018)





Figure 2.19 *Some Things Never Change*, Mr. Never Satisfied (Facebook, 2018)



Figure 2.20 *West End is the Standard*, Artist Unknown (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 2.21 *TFB*, Artist Unknown (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 2.22 Family Paint Day and Mural Painting on Westside Trail (Shaw, 2018)



Figure 2.23 *Honoring Carrie Steele, Keeper of Children*, Charmaine Minniefield (Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2018)





Figure 2.24 *Out of Town Yuppie*, Artist Unknown (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 2.25 Mural by Nes Loks (Martinez 2018)



Figure 2.26 *Done*, Artist Unknown. 725 Ponce Development (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 2.27 *Done*, Artist Unknown. Studioplex advertisement (Martinez, 2018)

## CHAPTER 3

### ALUMA FARM: A PLACE TO BUY A HEAD OF LETTUCE?

“When completed, the Atlanta Beltline will...put Atlanta on a path to 21st-century economic growth and sustainability” (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., n.d.).

Urban agriculture is a component of urban greening initiatives, so the emergence of urban farms near greenways is not uncommon. As urban agriculture scholars argue, these processes have been connected to gentrification (McClintock, 2018). Aluma Farm is particularly relevant in thinking about the Beltline because it is the Beltline’s pilot for urban agriculture, exemplifying the future possibilities of urban agriculture in other sites around the trails. ABI prefers to refer to Aluma Farm “[a]s the official operator of the Atlanta BeltLine Urban Farm at Allene Avenue” rather than its name, which demonstrates ABI’s intention of establishing other urban farms throughout the corridor. For example, there are two almost identical (one displays “Allene Avenue”) logos on ABI’s “urban farm” webpage (Figure 3.1) that are identical, neither logos represent Aluma Farm’s logo or include its name. Urban agriculture “contribut[es] to racial formation and racialized urban space, draw[ing] on an agrarian romanticization of “going back to the land” and “getting your hands dirty” and “re-inscrib[ing] paternalistic power asymmetries and colonial patterns of oppression” (McClintock, 2018:6).<sup>21</sup> At the same

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<sup>21</sup> UA scholars refer to possible reasons African Americans do not find UA appealing: racialized histories of agrarian labor and slavery, attempts to “distance themselves from racist imposed idioms of dirt, filth, and backwardness,” (Guthman, 2009: 436)

time, notions of improvement and “bringing good [organic] food to others rooted in white cultural histories mask the possibilities of considering urban agriculture as an exclusionary practice, especially since those who engage with urban agriculture are predominantly white (Guthman, 2008a, 2008b). At Aluma Farm, there are infinitely more complex processes wrought with contradictions that extend beyond gentrification. The farm’s materiality and its farmers/volunteers embody contradictions that complicate narratives of place and visions for the future.

### **3.1 SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND FOOD**

One of two urban farms in the city and the first farm with Beltline access, Aluma Farm is a 3.8-acre farm (Figure 3.2) located in Southwest Atlanta along the Westside Trail. Efforts to remediate the land of two former industrial manufacturing sites into a source from which crops could grow began in 2012. In 2015, Aluma Farm was officially established; Andy and Andrea, the farmers whose proposal had been accepted to operate the new farm, began working the soil that was no longer contaminated but incapable of sustaining crops. It has taken approximately two years for the soil to support life and allow for larger harvests. Beyond Andy and Andrea, Aluma Farm is comprised of two farmers, Lisa and Valentina, as well as Cornetta, the farm’s Outreach Coordinator.

It is important to note that, unlike other businesses near the Eastside Trail, Aluma Farm does not emphasize the Beltline as a marketing strategy, though in early October, I noticed that the farm’s plum purple sign had been slightly altered to include the Beltline’s

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associations with white values and colonial projects, social histories and preferences for anonymous supermarkets or corner stores, meanings of “organic,” among others.

urban farm logo toward its upper right. <sup>22</sup>Aluma Farm communicates through Instagram and Facebook, excluding references to the Westside Trail and Beltline. Instead, the farm's posts feature images of a specific week's vegetables, images depicting growing/harvesting processes, and events (as sponsors or participants).).

I volunteered at Aluma Farm for approximately three months, weeding, composting, preparing rows for planting, and harvesting. I noticed Aluma Farm as a place of contrasts on my first day volunteering. Enclosing the farms' green plants is a 6-foot-tall chain link fence. On the one hand, Aluma Farm believes urban farms "serve as models for the most sustainable form of agriculture and as connections between people and their food" (Aluma Farm, n.d.). Indeed, Aluma Farm embodies a commitment to environmental sustainability through their specialization in organic produce using cover crops and compost as well as their photovoltaic solar panels affixed atop the farm's main shed (Figure 3.3). Additionally, Aluma Farm's proximity to the Westside trail and surrounding neighborhoods considered as food deserts<sup>23</sup> encourages non-motorized transportation and enhances its accessibility to nearby neighborhoods (Figure 3.4). On the other hand, this focus on the cultivation of organic produce and reduction of fossil fuels stands in contrast to the built environment outside its fence, such as sidewalks in dire need of repavement, vacant buildings and industrial spaces (Figure 3.5), and the piles of discarded car tires and mattresses scattered along Allene Ave.

Regarding the second part of Aluma Farm's mission statement, farmers and volunteers prioritize connections between people and their food through community

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<sup>22</sup> There is one reference to the Beltline on Aluma Farm's "about" webpage to specify the farm's location near the Westside Trail.

<sup>23</sup> Kroger is the closest grocery store with a 12-minute car ride from Aluma Farm.

engagement and making produce accessible to surrounding communities. Aluma Farm hosts a farm stand every Thursday from late April to late November at 4:00-8:00 pm on green space near the trail; it recognizes EBT/SNAP, offering customers who use these forms of payment 50% off their purchase. Here, seasonal vegetables, fruits, and flowers are available for purchase. These items are sold in unenclosed carton containers or without packaging to comply with regulations for “organic” produce. Most, if not all, of the Aluma Farm team live in surrounding neighborhoods. Andy, Andrea, or Cornetta attend neighborhood association meetings of surrounding communities to receive feedback from residents about making their products more accessible or to promote farm events.<sup>24</sup> This past summer, Aluma Farm collaborated with the Atlanta Community Food Bank to host the latter’s Summer Meals program on-site each week, a program designed to address transportation problems for families living near the Westside Trail. Also, Andy and Andrea prioritize job applicants living in SW Atlanta (Aluma Farm, 2019). Volunteers who are weary of gentrification are motivated to donating time to contribute to socially just and “sustainable” Atlanta. However, these practices and narratives of connecting people to food and increasing accessibility to organic produce are just as contradictory as the farm’s materiality.

Aluma Farm’s logo (Figure 3.6) illustrates one of the contradictions between its intentions and its practices; it features two interlocked hands holding a plant, invoking solidarity and collaboration while advertising its Thursday farmstands from 4-8pm. One of the ways Aluma Farm seeks to build solidarity is by fostering community engagement

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<sup>24</sup> According to Andrea, “the farm stand is doing better than last year” because the new community coordinator, Cornetta, has promoted the farm stand at neighborhood meetings and increased community outreach efforts.

through volunteer hours, which would bring together residents of various communities to have a hand in growing their own food (volunteers choose produce that are harvested each week after every shift). Volunteer hours are Wednesdays and Fridays from 10 am to 1 pm, limiting the possibilities for residents who work during that time to serve as volunteers. Instead of engaging long-term residents who have lived in South Atlanta for more than a decade, Aluma Farm attracts volunteers who are typically in their mid-20s to 40s, live in various parts of Atlanta (or metro Atlanta), newcomers to SW Atlanta (residence of three years or less), and predominantly white. Aluma Farm's full-time farmers also recently moved to SW Atlanta and are white, except for Cornetta, who is African American and SW Atlanta native. Farm stand hours, as Aluma Farm's sign advertises, are one day a week for four hours; beyond farm stands, interested customers are unable to purchase produce. One June morning, for instance, another volunteer and I were pulling weeds from the blackberry bushes along Aluma Farm's fence along Allene Avenue when an African American man in his late fifties approached the other side of the fence. He asked Jeff and I if we owned the farm and if he could buy a head of lettuce, sharing that he lived nearby but wasn't aware that the farm existed before this walk. Upon seeing Lisa, who had been in the main shed, the man repeated, "I just want to buy a head of lettuce." Lisa walked around the fence, rather than speak through it, to apologize and inform him that produce is only sold during farm stand hours on Thursdays. The man shrugged his shoulders and thanked Lisa. Lisa returned toward us, seemingly embarrassed, explaining that there isn't much she can do in these cases since she's just an employee (Andrea and Andy were delivering produce to local restaurants). This example demonstrates two points. First, the man perceived the farm as private property rather than

a community farm and did not know Aluma Farm existed even though he lives nearby. Second, despite intentions for increasing accessibility to produce, the man was unable to purchase a head of lettuce at a time beyond farm stands, confirming Aluma Farm's limitation in accomplishing its goal for accessibility.

The contradictions that volunteers represented in terms of their visions of "improvement" compared to where they positioned themselves/how they perceived themselves as actors (or non-actors) in neighborhood/city change were among the most intriguing and demonstrative of the dissonance between intentions, realities, and possibilities of place-making. Many volunteers had recently purchased homes in West/Southwest Atlanta at comparatively affordable prices hoping the area would "improve." For example, one volunteer, Brandon, an African American man in his mid-twenties, purchased his home in September 2017 for \$30,000 in "a dilapidated [Southwest] neighborhood he trusted would improve." He has witnessed abandoned homes around him undergo remodeling and new owners investing to "make the outside look good...like they're proud of where they live." Brandon's neighbor, who he suspected was a drug dealer, and the "druggies" who frequented his block, are now gone. For him, projects like the Beltline "have the power to revive neighborhoods and eliminate degenerates."

Other volunteers perceived new businesses that repurpose industrial spaces as signs of improvement because West/Southwest Atlanta has been "isolated from the rest of Atlanta...left behind." Volunteers and farmers expressed the ever-increasing presence of "hipsters" who are "jacking up the prices of everything" as a concern affecting all of Atlanta, yet none considered their own role in contributing to neighborhood changes or referred to themselves as "hipsters" or "gentrifiers." One volunteer expressed her desire



to live in a place “that isn’t bland and a replicate of high-priced condos and stores that can be found in any other gentrified city.” While volunteers and farmers described their weariness of gentrification, they located recently established businesses in conversations. To illustrate, Andrea and Brandon excitedly informed the rest of the group (two volunteers and two farmers) about the kombucha café that had opened two weeks prior in the Lee + White site (one of the locations popularly associated with the Westside Trail). Brandon repeated his view of the Beltline as a positive force in the community, attracting new investment and providing goods/services to SW Atlanta. Andrea agreed but paused for a few seconds before asking us whether the community could still experience investment and benefit from new businesses without displacement. Andrea’s pause demonstrates her anxiety over the area’s gentrification. Brandon hesitantly responded, “I don’t believe so; investment to neglected areas makes them attractive, so I don’t believe there’s a way to achieve investment without an increase in property values.” Then, the two farmers identified Monday Night Garage, a craft brewery based in Atlanta that is also located in Lee + White and opened in September 2017, and both Andrea and Brandon recommended Lean Draft House, which offers “local and Latin flavors” and craft beer, near GWP as the best option. The latter pub simultaneously obscures its recent presence in West End on its website when promoting pub space for neighborhood groups on its website: “Located in the oldest and trendiest Atlanta neighborhood...[w]e understand the importance of revitalizing our community while also welcoming new neighbors (Lean Draft House, 2017). Here, Lean Draft House, established in June 2017, leads readers to assume it has existed for longer than it has and reveals its goal of contributing to West End’s “revitalization.”

Race partially explains these contradictions, but as Brandon, one of three individuals of color, illustrates, market-based rationalizations to justify neighborhood change as positive and necessary intersects with other identity markers and experiences. Brandon is from a suburb north of Atlanta that is generally considered affluent, and he recently earned a bachelor's degree in business administration. Similarly, Aluma Farm's farmers are also not originally from Atlanta and are white. Identity markers and experiences also intersect with narratives of place as "dilapidated" that require a linear path of economic investment to facilitate "improvement" as well as the notions of urban agriculture as a presumed universal positive attribute based on "bringing good food to others." Recall that Aluma Farm was already established by the time Brandon and other volunteers started volunteering. Aluma Farm's existence in a "food desert" with intentions to "connect people with their food" reinforces racialized agricultural landscapes/labor and aligns with colonial notions of "improvement." If the argument is enhancing accessibility to produce, then Aluma Farm in some cases does not fulfill this goal since, as the man who was unable to purchase a head of lettuce confirms, this accessibility is restricted to Thursday farm stands. Moreover, connecting people to their food also is limited in scope when the assumption is that this desire is universal and that there are distinct unilateral methods of accomplishing this connection. Beyond this, volunteers and Aluma Farm employees seem to disassociate themselves from "gentrifiers," obscuring their very involvement in the transformation of place.



Figure 3.1 Urban Farm Logo (Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2019)



Figure 3.2 Aluma Farm Site (Google Maps, 2018)



Figure 3.3 Aluma Farm's main shed (Aluma Farm, 2018)



Figure 3.4 Neighborhoods Surrounding Aluma Farm (Google Maps, 2019)



Figure 3.5 Former auto repair shop on Allene Ave (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 3.6 Aluma Farm Sign with Logo (Martinez, 2018)

## CHAPTER 4

### WESTSIDE TRAIL AS “REFUGE FROM THE CITY?”

“The Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum will evolve into a twenty-two-mile long horticultural collection. This...linear expanse provides neighborhood connectivity along the Atlanta BeltLine, while showcasing unique natural characteristics within each community. Neighborhoods near the Arboretum will be identifiable by the surrounding trees, and visitors will be able to develop a better appreciation for the value of trees in an urban environment” (Trees Atlanta, 2019).

The Westside Trail fully constructed in September 2017. At an underpass (Lawton Street-location of *West End Remembers* mural), the trail acts as a sidewalk, following White Street until (Figure 4.1) it reaches Gordon White Park. Westside Trail sections north of Gordon White Park traverse mainly residential areas surrounded by older trees while sections south of the park feature abandoned or redeveloped industrial buildings and recently planted saplings and grasses. The Westside Trail’s atmosphere is relaxing and welcoming; it is not congested, and I was greeted with a head nod, wave, verbal hello or combination of these greetings by at least two users during each of my visits. On each visit, I observed a group of approximately 10 Latino men working on creating the Beltline’s ideal landscape (Figure 4.2) with multiple trucks and equipment to plant grasses, lay down mulch, level soil, etc. On my first visit to the trail section beyond Aluma Farm, I asked a sixty-year-old Asian woman who emerged from the opposite direction if she could direct me toward the Beltline’s terminal. With a puzzled expression

and shrug of her shoulders, she replied that she was unfamiliar with the Beltline and thus did not know where it begins or ends.

Trees Atlanta, a non-profit organization established in 1985, preserves Atlanta's trees/forests and constructs green space by "planting, conserving, and educating" (Trees Atlanta, n.d.). While Trees Atlanta implements various types of education and planting programs/events, two details are important to note. First, Trees Atlanta has two locations, an older center in an Eastside Trail neighborhood and newer education center on the Eastside Trail adjacent to the new Atlanta Beltline Partnership (ABP) center, which opened on in late April 2018 to offer interactive exhibits for visitors to learn about the Beltline's history and impact (Miller, 2018). Though the former was established prior to the Eastside Trail's construction, both locations are examples of the clustering of partners and Beltline resources (i.e., ABP center) on the Eastside Trail. Second, the organization has partnered with ABI to create arboretums, "a botanical garden focused on woody plants, which are grown for research, education and display" (Trees Atlanta, 2019) throughout the trails and host walking tours to educate visitors about these trees and plants. ABI/Trees Atlanta offer 90-minute Arboretum Walking Tours of Westside and Eastside Trails on Fridays and Saturdays throughout the year; two walking tours of each trail typically occur on Fridays; on Saturdays, the tour alternates locations each weekend. Interested individuals register for a tour on ABI's website and receive notifications and details about tour meeting points and schedule. Interestingly, arboretum information on Trees Atlanta's website solely refers to the Eastside Trail and further attributes the organization's planting of native grass and wildflower prairies on this trail as an "ecological recovery," contributing to the trail's "beautiful aesthetic" and "unique sense

of place” (Trees Atlanta, 2019). As I detail below, the walking tour leader categorized the trail and its surrounding place as not quite urban and as a refuge (apart from the city).

This categorization is concerning to those who connect racialization to the meanings of nature considering West End’s recent period of disinvestment, demographic patterns, Atlanta’s racialized past, and the racialized sociopolitical constructs of “nature” as refuge (as well as the unequal labor/social relations these landscapes obscure).

On a Saturday morning in June, I walked to Rose Circle Park to join Sam, a Trees Atlanta “docent,” who would lead the Westside Walking tour, as well as other tour participants. Including the docent, there were approximately thirteen people in the tour group mainly comprised of individuals of color, excluding the docent and three men. Participant motivation for attending the tour varied: some participants who recently moved to Atlanta were interested in learning more about the Beltline; a couple were on vacation from London and “locals” had recommended the tour for both trails; one of the white men lived near the Eastside Trail and wanted to compare it to the Westside for the first time. Sam, a middle-aged Caucasian woman, initiated the tour by elaborating the Beltline’s history, Atlanta’s history as a railroad hub, and Trees Atlanta’s role in creating the arboretum, focusing on trees found throughout the trail and the positive impacts of the Beltline (economic development, job opportunities, walkability, infrastructure revitalization). Sam did briefly comment on Beltline-induced gentrification but only in reference to the Eastside Trail, particularly Old Fourth Ward because it is a neighborhood that has undergone the most visible gentrification, overlooking the gentrification of the neighborhood we were then standing in. Sam’s comment indicated how the effects of gentrification are attributed to market dynamics and beyond the control of ABI or City of

Atlanta, excusing both entities from responsibilities of taking action to prevent displacement. From Rose Circle Park, Sam led the group toward a bridge (Lawton Street), where she paused to explain the area's industrialization (and the combined efforts of the Beltline and Trees Atlanta in ecological remediation) and allow participants to take pictures since the bridge provides an elevated position from which to photograph the trail below (Figure 4.3). We then retreated from the bridge to descend a ramp leading to another underpass (Lee Street) with Sam indicating specific plants or comparing the Westside Trail to the Eastside along the way. Instead of commenting on the art that was displayed on the walls of Lee Street underpass or *West End Remembers* (the mural that acknowledges West End's complex histories), Sam only pointed out the hidden Mickey Mouse ears within an owl mural painted by street/Disney artist ARCY (Figure 4.4). According to Sam, the Westside Trail is more peaceful because there are fewer people who use it, less "urban" due to expansive green space and undeveloped land, more "environmentally sustainable," and she referred to it as a "refuge from the city."

The walking tour was informative about the native plants dispersed along the Westside Trail, the Beltline's origins, and Trees Atlanta's role. This tour nonetheless excluded pertinent information relating to West End's histories (the group walked the trail section in West End), factors that have produced the area's post-industrial landscapes, and a holistic perspective about the Beltline's impact as Sam focused on its benefits. In the Westside Trail's context, the arboretum naturalizes West End's post-industrial history by framing the trail through the aesthetic of industrial ruins and trees. Additionally, omitting references to the remainder of the trail and prioritizing the section south of Gordon White Park communicates to tour participants that it is the only section



worth visiting. By naturalizing Westside Trail neighborhoods and imparting partial understandings of the Beltline’s implications, Trees Atlanta’s walking tours align with ABI’s vision of reconciling racialized histories and creating a “sustainable” Atlanta without contestation. In the following chapter, I present a community organization that strives to disrupt the dominant positive narrative associated with the Beltline’s promise of sustainable development.

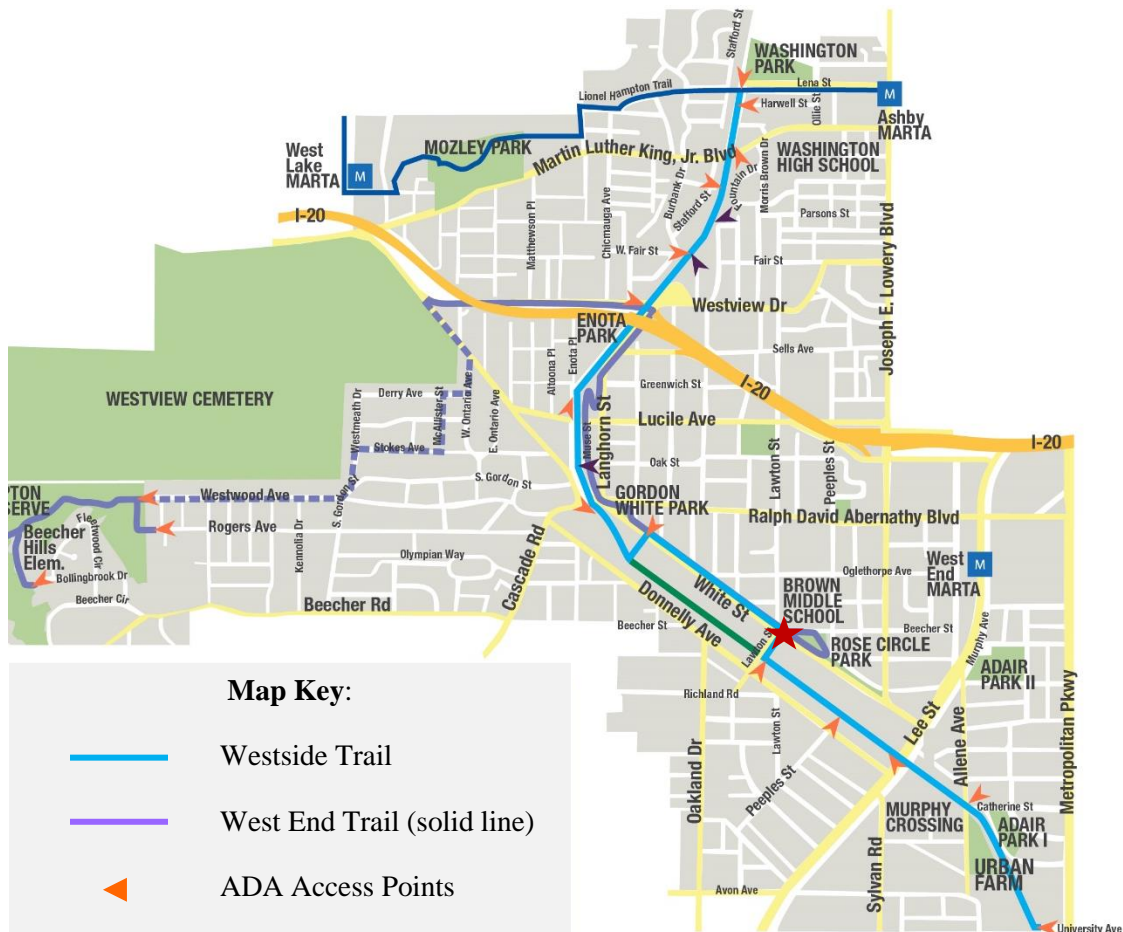


Figure 4.1 West End and Westside Trail Map (Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2019)



Figure 4.2 Workers Creating Trail Landscape (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 4.3 Westside Trail leading to Lawton Street and following White Street SW (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 4.4 Lawton Street Bridge View of Westside Trail (Martinez, 2018)



Figure 4.5 Owl, ARCY (Martinez, 2018)

## CHAPTER 5

### HOUSING JUSTICE LEAGUE’S CONTESTATION AGAINST “THE ATLANTA WAY”

“As one of the largest, most wide-ranging urban redevelopment programs in the United States, the Atlanta BeltLine is building a more socially and economically resilient Atlanta” (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., n.d.).

Housing Justice League (HJL), founded in 2012, is a grassroots community-led organization advancing a housing justice movement in Atlanta by advocating for affordable housing as well as empowering homeowners, renters, and neighborhoods “to self-organize and demand their right to remain” (Housing Justice League, 2019). HJL emphasizes housing as a human right from which all other rights depend. The only way, therefore, to accomplish actual social justice, or at least challenge the persistent cycle of uneven development, is to create spaces for individuals who are directly oppressed and confront injustice to become leaders. The organization attributes race as the underlying explanatory factor of the city’s past and current patterns of uneven development, which HJL refers to as “‘The Atlanta Way,’ an alliance of first all-white and then of Black and white elites supporting a type of economic development that pursues growth at all costs while shutting down community-led resistance...markers of this strategy remain on the streets and in the hearts of residents” (Johnson et al., 2017: 6). To build power among historically oppressed residents and bring housing justice at the forefront of all Atlantans’ concerns, HJL’s plan is four-fold: (1) Mass education among existing residents and

newcomers (2) Facilitating community organization through tenant associations (3) Holding city officials accountable for anti-racist policies (4) Direct action and protest. While HJC implements its plan using various methods and events, such as organizing protests at the state capitol and propagating reports that result from participatory action research with residents in Beltline communities, this chapter focuses on HJL's monthly meetings and its Beltline4All campaign.

## **5.1 BELTLINE4ALL**

In early June, I came across HJL's promotional sticker of its Beltline4All initiative (Figure 5.1) affixed on a stop sign near the Eastside Trail, featuring its social media information. HJL's Beltline4All campaign aims to collect signatures for a petition to pressure the City of Atlanta and ABI to politically prioritize affordable housing in Beltline neighborhoods and create safeguards against displacement. I followed its social media and learned about HJL's first in-person Beltline4All petition drive three weeks later through Facebook. Interested volunteers were instructed to meet Tim, an HJL leader and campaign organizer, at Ponce City Market's shed (Figure 5.2). The drive was strategically situated at the shed during its farmers market due to its high customer turnout and the Eastside Trail's popularity in general. I joined a group of eight people, including Tim, to volunteer for that first petition drive. All volunteers were white non-Atlanta natives in their mid-twenties to late thirties who live in gentrified neighborhoods themselves.

Tim gathered volunteers on a grassy area in between the trail and Ponce City Market's Shed because the latter is private property while the former is "public" space; he distributed clipboards with pages of signature sheets, Beltline4All stickers, pens, information about the petition to share with potential signers, and posters reading

“development without displacement.” This petition drive continued every Tuesday evening in the same location throughout the summer, but fewer volunteers participated in the weeks following the first drive. Eventually Tim and I were the only people canvassing for the petition, drawing parallels to Sam’s (Trees Atlanta tour guide during the Westside Walking Tour) sense that gentrification is beyond the control of ABI and city leaders. Similarly, the absence of volunteers in subsequent petition drives indicates they too perceived gentrification as beyond their control. Tim would yell “fight gentrification” while spinning the posters while I sought potential signers who were using the trail or shopping at the farmers’ market.

Several points emerged from this experience. First, more individuals of color signed the petition compared to white individuals. Women and people under fifty were also more likely to sign than men and people over fifty. Second, reasons provided for refusing to sign were related to anxieties about property values, infused with beliefs in the myth of meritocracy or market-based rationalizations, or hopelessness over the extent of the housing problem in and around Atlanta. One white woman, for example, refused to sign because she was hesitant about property values and continued to justify her decision: “I’ve lived in Virginia-Highland [affluent white neighborhood near the Eastside Trail] for years and work to pay to live there...why can’t others do the same?” Though this woman did not specify race, she does invoke historical associations between public housing or presence of nonwhite residents and a decrease in property value and represents colorblindness because she believes everyone has the same opportunities. Third, reasons for signing the petition included personal experiences with displacement or disappointment over the Beltline’s failure in fulfilling its promise of social inequality.

Underlying these decisions to sign or not to sign are racialized perceptions of for whom affordable housing exists and who typically supports anti-displacement policy (Eagle, 2017; Scally & Tighe, 2015). For instance, two African American women in their thirties approached me to learn about why the “white man [Tim] was yelling ‘fight gentrification.’” They explained they were surprised to see a white person acting to prevent gentrification because, for them, “they [white individuals] just don’t care cause it doesn’t affect them...they wanna get rid of us.” An African American man acknowledged the need for pressuring ABI and the City of Atlanta to fulfill and expand its commitment to affordable housing, so he signed the petition. However, he also shared his feelings of hopelessness and need to “work with the system: This is a fight that has been fought and lost in the past, especially by Atlanta’s blacks. That’s why I’m doing what it takes to rise financially, so I don’t get displaced and have more chances to live a good life.” This man connected current struggles to advance affordable housing to the city’s racialized history that inhibited African Americans’ “right to the city,” viewing personal economic success as one of the few ways to live well and remain in place, at least for Atlantans of color.

## **5.2 MONTHLY MEETINGS**

HJL’s leaders and members are predominantly comprised of residents living in historically African American neighborhoods in South Atlanta, where there are a high number of communities where displacement has increased or where apartments in substandard conditions violate renter rights, though residents from neighborhoods other than South Atlanta as well as non-Atlantans are also encouraged to become members. A potluck mass meeting occurs on the third Tuesday of each month at a recreation center in

South Atlanta. These meetings along with other events, protests, or city policy updates are displayed on HJL's Facebook page and Instagram. Approximately thirty-two people of various races, ages, and neighborhoods attended July's mass meeting. As individuals entered into the center's main room, HJL leaders and other members greeted everyone by name. Before the meeting commenced, Alison, one of HJL's leaders, gathered newcomers for an "orientation" to the organization's goals and mission as well as answer any questions. Including myself, all five newcomers were graduate students interested in urban studies or policy. I asked Allison if ABI or ABP staff participate in HJL events.

Alison shook her head as she replied:

"No, they often claim that they're not responsible for doing the things we do, but what we do is part of their mission statement. They don't have the willpower to transform housing policy. It's not that they're our adversaries, but what we do challenges their inaction. We've tried to increase participatory planning to include resident input in development of their communities."

Tables were arranged to form an "E" and HJL leaders sat among members. To begin the meeting, Alison prompted everyone to introduce themselves; most attendees shared they were residents of South Atlanta. Then, members stood up to share updates and information with the group; one woman urged members to join a protest at her apartment complex to pressure management to repair leaking ceilings and broken windows. Alison would pause and ask if there were any questions or suggestions after each speaker sat down. We broke into groups based on current campaigns/projects where members strategized how to further progress with their project, one of which was focused on the Beltline4All campaign led by Tim. HJL provides alternative spaces for engaging

with neighborhood and city affairs, building solidarity among and across neighborhoods. The primary purpose for providing details about HJL's meeting is to illustrate the spaces of inclusivity and reduction of knowledge hierarchies: leaders amongst members, pauses after each speaker to encourage input, involvement of South Atlantans, strategizing sessions where members influence the direction of a project relevant to their communities. I will further contextualize these meeting details in chapter eight, where I discuss ABI's community engagement events.

HJL's Beltline4All campaign and responses to it highlight the complexities impeding ABI's vision of racial reconciliation and a united Atlanta. Meanwhile, the organization's goal of challenging the inaction of ABI and city leaders, as Allison mentioned, alludes to the contradictions between promotions of participatory planning and community engagement related to the Beltline and on-the-ground realities. Despite the challenges posed by historical and contemporary marginalization and exclusion, residents of South/ Southwest Atlanta are not powerless; through HJL, these residents are engaging in alternative politics and contesting the current politics of belonging. The subsequent chapter centers on the experiences of residents living in Beltline neighborhoods, elaborating upon contradictions of place, belonging, and rights to the city.





Figure 5.1 HJL's Beltline4All Campaign Sticker (HJL, 2018)

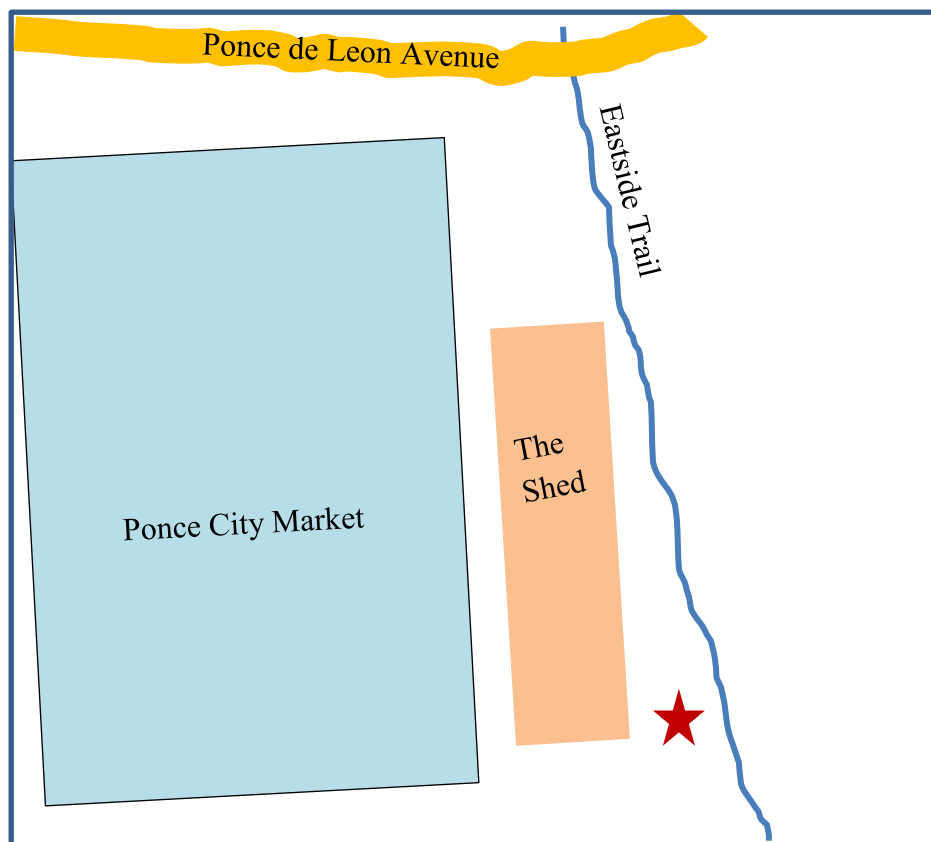


Figure 5.2 Beltline4All Petition Drive Location at Ponce City Market Shed

## CHAPTER 6

### RESIDENT PERSPECTIVES— “WHAT DOES IT *MEAN* TO BE LIVING BY THE BELTLINE?”

“The Atlanta BeltLine’s greatest promise is not the physical connection to neighborhoods, but the project’s ability to connect these communities to the places, spaces, resources, and assets necessary for them to thrive (job centers, housing, food, transit, greenspace, retail, etc.)” (Affordable Housing Working Group, 2018).

#### 6.1 WEST AND SOUTHWEST ATLANTA

I conducted six interviews of neighborhood association leaders/ residents residing near the Westside Trail or the Southside Trail’s proposed trajectory. Except for one person, all interviewees are African American varying in age from mid-thirties to early sixties. The president of a South Atlanta neighborhood is the only native Atlantan who was raised in the neighborhood in which he currently lives; women and men were equally represented. Interviews with these residents/leaders exemplified the contradictions in the opening quote from ABI’s affordable housing team. In some cases, interviewees noted their suspicions over ABI and the city’s conspiracy in eliminating low-income residents from Beltline neighborhoods through homeowner insurance fines or city code enforcement. While many interviewees align with the Beltline’s ability to connect communities to greenspaces, Nora, Tess, and Walter’s experiences and perspectives illuminate the dissonance between the Beltline’s promise to connect (some) neighborhoods to the resources they need.

Displacement, marginalization, disinvestment, and the decline in community involvement were a few of the interviewees' concerns. Instead of relying on the Beltline, ABI, or City of Atlanta, neighborhood associations of West, Southwest, and South Atlanta provide their residents with resources. In Adair Park,<sup>25</sup> a SW neighborhood established in 1892 where displacement caused by rising property values in Adair Park has been an ongoing concern, the neighborhood association connects residents with resources to "help them understand what's going on" and "keep them informed." Nora, the president of Adair Park's neighborhood association for two years, shared that another way the neighborhood association attempts to mediate the impacts of gentrification is to seek information about any new businesses intending to establish themselves within Adair Park as well as to include residents in these conversations. In other words, the neighborhood association "tr[ies] to get in front of it instead of just letting it happen." Consequently, business owners and developers are invited to "inclusive" neighborhood meetings, which are open spaces for residents to "see what's going on...ask questions."

Nora described her neighborhood as a "don't judge a book by its cover type of situations," explaining individuals who further explore the neighborhood itself are often surprised by what they encounter. Additionally, Nora refers to most Adair Park residents as "good neighbors," people who have lived in the neighborhood for decades and "are scared of what's happening" as the area experiences gentrification. While the Beltline has been a source of tension and anxiety in Atlanta neighborhoods by increasing property values, Nora reveals that the idea of the Beltline alone is cause for concern among residents because "still to this day, a lot of people don't really understand what [the]

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<sup>25</sup> The Beltline's Westside Trail extends for approximately half a mile through the neighborhood to its current terminal near Aluma Farm.

whole beltline situation means. What does it *mean* to be living by the Beltline?”

Residents are particularly concerned when observing the “extreme” sequence of change around the Eastside Trail and anticipate similar changes. In this and the previous paragraph, Nora alludes to the Beltline’s implications of uncertainty and reconfiguration of place. Attempting to get in front of Beltline-related developments and seeing “what’s going on” demonstrates how Beltline processes are unconnected to residents’ sense of control. Also, Nora’s question indicates the multiple meanings and possibilities associated with the Beltline, revealing the Beltline’s capacity to reconfigure and remake neighborhoods.

Nora believes “race plays a big part” in the disparities she observes based on Atlanta’s inability to be “open to change” or its failure to be “forward thinking when it comes to [the] conversation of race.” She explains that Georgia and Atlanta’s histories have never been a “focal point,” bringing up the eponymous founder of her neighborhood, who she believes was an advocate for segregation and a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Nora names a decline in sense of community as an additional concern, clarifying there are different ways to perceive sense of community: “Some people, some communities or neighborhoods can have a strong sense of community negatively. It can be a ‘We don’t want this. I want that,’ setting all these parameters and rules to the point where your neighborhood is actually hurting. I think some neighborhoods are definitely strong and tight-knit, but I don’t know if they are tightly knit for the right reasons.” Then, she illustrates her statement with her neighborhood as an example: “There are people who have recently moved, and they just don’t care. They’re not the ones at meetings. They’re not the ones trying to figure out what’s happening.”

Tess, Capitol View's neighborhood association president, has been a resident of Capitol View for three years. Capitol View, established in 1910, is in South Atlanta (borders Adair Park to the south). She describes her neighborhood as "very tight-knit" where she "knows most of [her] neighbors on [her] street" and contrasts this to living in the suburbs. Tess attributed differences in home design/road layout is one factor that "fosters a sense of community;" in the suburbs, most homes feature garages whereas homes in her neighborhood rarely do so, encouraging neighbors to speak with one another as they leave or enter their homes and encounter others nearby. Tess is committed to helping her community persevere and prosper even if the Beltline and its impacts do not affect her personally because "I'm going to be okay regardless, but what affects my neighbors affects me. If they're losing, I'm losing ultimately." When elaborating upon her neighborhood's conflict with gentrification, Tess self-disclosed her role: "I'm black, but I would be considered a gentrifier because we came and changed the face of the neighborhood [and we have] a different economic situation than a lot of people (Tess owns a construction business with her husband)."

Originally from New Jersey, arriving in Atlanta's racially segregated neighborhoods was perplexing as she and motioned with her hands, "It's like White people live here. The black people live here." Visible changes to the neighborhood encouraged Tess to move to Capitol View. When she was driving along a road through the neighborhood with her daughter to look at potential homes, they noticed a "Caucasian couple walking," which was "odd." Further down, they saw "another Caucasian couple...a gay couple...pushing a baby." A few days later, she attended an open house where neighbors invited her family to a community event, which is when she witnessed

the extent of the area's diversity and communality. Tess recalls that this experience was surprising because the main street that traverses the neighborhood (Metropolitan Parkway formerly Stuart Avenue) "was known for prostitutes and strip clubs." Tess has not considered Atlanta as a true city, resembling more as "a really big spread out town." Thus, she argues the Beltline has elevated Atlanta to an "urban status."

Tess related Capitol View's concerns with displacement, marginalization, and disinvestment to the U. S's broader historical and contemporary sociopolitical context that have forced "minorities [to be] economically depressed in America." She is particularly aware of the challenges senior citizens face as gentrification occurs and the manipulation of code enforcement as excuses to pressure lower-income residents to move out. Threatening the "diversity of the neighborhood on a number of levels, some people don't have the means to [respond to code enforcement]. They're forced to either sell because they've gotten a million fines or can't keep up property tax wise." The only way to initiate social justice, according to Tess, is to alter the political and economic structure of the U.S. Tess doubts Atlanta's recent mandatory inclusionary zoning (passed in 2017) will prevent the displacement of low-income residents because only a small percentage of units are required to classify as "affordable" and does not prioritize individuals earning less than \$30,000 or even \$20,000. Affordable housings' inability to accommodate all individuals who are displaced combined with "Atlanta's shitty transportation" are "push[ing] them in environments" where wonders if "we are just killing people."

Regarding disinvestment and marginalization, Tess explained Capitol View has several properties that are rarely maintained by their owners, proving to be difficult to overcome/ address and this type of disinvestment incurs "psychological impacts." She

recalled a recent example of a commercial property near her home with a broken glass door that had been unattended to for weeks. She is well aware that this sort of negligence “would never happen in other [predominantly white regardless of class] communities.” Zoning has contributed to Capitol View’s marginalization over the years because, as Tess confirmed, “you don’t get amenities in industrial zoning.” Zoning, management (or lack thereof) or foreclosed properties and placement of affordable housing, Tess predicts, are factors that will ensure her neighborhood’s continued marginalization as she explains that “every bit of industrial that they need in the city, they’ll dump over here, just like they’ll dump every bit of low- income housing they need to meet their target [ABI’s goal of 5,600 affordable units by project’s completion] will be over here.”

Walter, Peoplestown Revitalization Corporation (PRC) president, was born and raised in South Atlanta. Peoplestown, established in 1885, is directly south of downtown with I-85 as its eastern boundary. PRC is “an organization [that] started back 25 years ago as a way to create an organization that represented the needs and the desires of Peoplestown community.” PRC has established redevelopment plans alongside the neighborhood and has provided 300 single-family and multi-family affordable housing units. The organization’s primary focus is to prioritize “low-income housing and economic development” as well as “social enterprise” (i.e., bringing jobs to the community, establishing job training programs, and helping residents engage with local politics). Walter echoed Nora and Tess’s suspicion of intentional elimination of low-income residents as he explained he has seen insurance inspectors or code enforcement officials drive around and people’s [homeowner insurance] is being threatened with

cancellation “because they need to do work on their houses (e.g., installing new roofs, painting the house’s exterior, cutting down trees).”

Walter distinguishes Peoplestown as a “thriving community [with] a lot of good leaders; people who've been engaged [,] believe in the rights of residents, [fight] for a just cause...against injustice. We've been one of the few neighborhoods that really kind of kick off, whenever someone needs something, something needs to be done...Peoplestown residents...are always ones to step up to the plate to help people or help others understand the plight of what's going on.” Based on Walter’s experiences, without ABI’s willingness to “start doing something different,” the Southside Trail will bring nothing but “displacement and uproot of people who've been a part of these communities for years...and take away the historical aspect of these communities.” Like Tess and Nora, Walter fears newcomers who invest in the neighborhood are “not here to stay” while “others are not engaged [with existing residents or neighborhood affairs].” Unlike other neighborhood leaders who observed a diminishment in the sense of community or solidarity, Walter concludes the interview with an optimistic perspective as he states, “We still got residents there that are still fighting. They are going to be fighting to the end.”

One contradiction between the opening quote and residents’ actual realities is the perceived conspiracy of the City of Atlanta and ABI in imposing mechanisms for displacing low-income residents from their neighborhoods. Nora, Tess, and Walter alluded to the historical discrimination and exclusion of African Americans in decision-making processes, opportunities for success and well-being (i.e., employment, city services, politics, zoning, etc.). Interviewees noted the reluctance of local and state



government to acknowledge race in contemporary politics or urban planning, much less Atlanta and Georgia's racialized histories of attending to current inequalities. Distrust in the City of Atlanta, and in turn, ABI as a public-private partnership is rooted in these neighborhoods' historical (and contemporary) marginalization, which makes interviewees weary of the Beltline's promoted benefits that are intended for certain Atlantans. Moreover, all interviewees emphasized the efforts of their neighborhood associations or community solidarity in providing resources residents need to cope with current anxieties over neighborhood change. Conversations with West/Southwest residents thus complicate idealized notions over the Beltline's ability to connect neighborhoods to the resources needed to thrive.

Nora, Tess, and Walter identified anxieties stemming from the Beltline that are beyond mere fear of displacement. Nora directly links the whiteness of newcomers one symbol (among many) of neighborhood change: "[R]esidents 'of color... see an influx of white people moving in...that's all they see' and attribute this to the Beltline," implying similar distrust of white individuals as that of city officials based on racialized histories and social relations. For Tess, the association of white newcomers as visible signs of a neighborhood's "improvement" was one of the factors that convinced her family to move to Capitol View. Walter did not mention newcomers' race, though his apprehension that Peoplestown "won't be a place for existing residents but a place where other people come inside from outside" insinuates newcomers are white and existing residents as Black since South Atlanta's neighborhoods have been historically African American. Additionally, access to information/knowledge and perceived sense of powerlessness in relation to Beltline decision-making/implementation were themes underlying interviews.

For example, Nora's phrases, "help them understand what's going on," "keep them informed," or "see what's going on...ask questions," suggests that current neighborhood changes are beyond the control of residents or neighborhood associations. These phrases also illustrate Nora's prioritization of one of the ways the neighborhood association does possess power: the power to inform and prepare residents. In this case, information and preparation resemble disaster preparedness than an example of "equitable/ participatory planning." Walter further exemplifies frustration over forces beyond the neighborhood's control when he warns ABI will continue to uproot residents and erase the historical aspect of communities unless it decides to modify its "business-as-usual" practices.

An interesting pattern that emerged from conducting interviews of residents living in South/Southwest Atlanta was the articulation of their role in neighborhood change. Four of the six interviewees clarified they were not originally from Atlanta and recently moved to their current neighborhoods in a period of five or less years. The residents who specifically named themselves "gentrifiers" elaborated the irony or exception of serving as a gentrifier. For example, Tess contextualized her role as gentrifier as unusual when she explained: "I'm black, but I would be considered a gentrifier." In articulating that she is black and including "but," Tess suggests African Americans are not typically perceived as gentrifiers. Additionally, Tess places blame for the reproduction of current racial inequalities on a collective "we" as she situated Atlanta's problems as an effect of the country's economic and political structure and posed the question "are we just killing people?" Throughout the interview, Tess appeared troubled by her economic success on the one hand and her desire to help everyone in her community on the other. Here, she is recognizing herself as a contributor to gentrification and implicates those who accept the

status quo as factors facilitating inequality. A leader from another West Atlanta neighborhood specifically invoked common associations of whiteness with gentrifiers: “I’m black and I’m a gentrifier...but I’m not seen as a gentrifier in the same way that my husband is, who is white.”

## **6.2 EAST ATLANTA**

To understand the perspectives and experiences of residents living near the Eastside Trail, I conducted seven interviews (six face-to-face, one phone) of neighborhood leaders/residents, ranging from twenty minutes to an hour. All interviewees were white individuals who were not raised in the neighborhood in which they currently reside; their ages varied from mid-thirties to late-fifties, and there was an equal representation of women and men.

Mike, Virginia-Highland Civic Association’s (VHCA) planning chair, has lived in Virginia-Highland, a neighborhood northeast of Ponce de Leon Avenue established in 1904, for fourteen years.<sup>26</sup> His committee “deals with neighborhood planning (i.e., traffic calming, sidewalks, intersection safety, speeding issues) fundraising, park maintenance, [neighborhood] beautification.” Fundraising events, such as Virginia-Highland’s annual Summer Fest and Tour of Homes, “provides a little identity to the neighborhood.” Additionally, VHCA works alongside their city council members, who have been “very responsive” toward addressing their concerns/needs. For example, city council representatives have followed through on resident complaints over road safety that the planning committee has submitted by installing stop signs or speed bumps.

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<sup>26</sup> The Eastside Trail traverses it for approximately 0.64 of a mile from Ponce de Leon Avenue to Piedmont Park.

Mike described Virginia-Highland as “a lovely in-town neighborhood with great neighbors and some really nice restaurants.” Having a professional and academic background in geography, Mike drew a map (Figure 6.1) and notated locations to which he referred during our conversation. Mike imagined “Atlanta [as] a circle with the interstates coming in and coming out. Downtown's [there] but things are happening more around Virginia-Highland.” He also acknowledges “that [on] the other side of downtown... there's a lot of stuff going on, but [he doesn't] go over there...[Virginia-Highland] is [his] little place.” Mike believes “there's definitely a racial divide between the east and westside. People see the west side as dangerous, crime-ridden. A connected Beltline would maybe get rid of that a little bit.” To overcome some of this racial divide, Mike suggests that neighborhood associations from one side of the city should partner with associations of neighborhoods in other parts of the city. According to Mike, Virginia-Highland has been expensive for as long as he remembers; the Beltline is contributing to ever-increasing property values. To address exclusion at a neighborhood level, Mike mentioned that “lack of income diversity, provision of affordable housing options, and the homeless population are topics the civic association board has [targeted].” Regarding perceptions about “community,” Mike insisted that Virginia-Highland has been a “strong neighborhood, strong community before the Beltline,” which has not changed. For example, in the 1970s, the neighborhood successfully “banded together” in opposition to a proposed interstate extension that threatened to divide Virginia-Highland. Since the 1970s, “people who moved [Virginia-Highland] [have] really wanted to make [it] a better place,” fostering its “community solidarity.”

Although Mike is aware that displacement is rising elsewhere in Atlanta, he is not familiar with any homeowner or renter who has moved due to rising property costs in Virginia-Highland. Businesses, on the other hand, have experienced negative effects of relocating as rents increase. Moreover, Mike names increased traffic as another negative impact on Virginia-Highland and Atlanta in general. Commuters take side streets through the neighborhood, “rushing...and zooming down these streets that were never meant to serve as an artery.” Residents submit their complaints to the planning committee that then passes the complaints to their council person to install stop signs or speed bumps. Not only are the streets increasingly crowded with cars; streets are also increasingly crowded with walking visitors and Beltline users. He suggests that signs near Beltline access points leading into neighborhoods (Figure 6.2) are necessary to direct/ inform people and ensure the safe movement of cars and people. Relatedly, he also suggests that signage that read, ““Virginia-Highland This Way”” as well as signs directing people to nearby shops and stores would benefit the community. He pointed to the north of the neighborhood near Piedmont Park on his self-created map: “People who live up here, they’re probably [not going to be either negatively or positively impacted] other than maybe enjoying walking on the Beltline.” All these impacts, Mike emphasized, are based on his own personal experiences but mentions that the experiences of residents who live “in different quadrants of Virginia-Highland...are a little bit different.”

Peter is president of Fourth Ward Neighbors, the neighborhood association that corresponds with Old Fourth Ward’s southeastern section (bounded by Decatur Street SE, Boulevard, Freedom Parkway). He has lived in Old Fourth Ward for 18 years and served as president for six years. Peter describes Old Fourth Ward “as the hottest, trendiest

neighborhood [because] it's a walkable community filled with at least 100 restaurants, three or four theaters, bike paths, walking paths, and green space. It is also a 20-minute walk from downtown.” The neighborhood was “trendy” and gentrifying prior to the Beltline, but the Beltline exacerbated these changes. Similarly to Mike, Peter first mentions increased traffic and decreased street parking as negative consequences because Old Fourth Ward “was previously [an] industrial neighborhood, [so] there are some homes that were built without off-street parking since a lot of the homes were mill homes.” Beyond limited street parking, residents must also experience neighborhood traffic when attempting to drive as “folks from out of town that don't know where they're going and Uber drivers, Lyft drivers dropping people off in the middle of the street.”

The Beltline has made the area “cost prohibitive,” especially for those in the service industry. Peter offered an example of a cook who had to move after living in an apartment for 8 years where management increased rent by 50% and refused to repair anything, which pressured low-income individuals into moving out. Peter named an increased feeling of security and walkability as positive impacts. Peter recalls that “once upon a time [he] never walked out of the area, but [he now] feel[s] perfectly safe walking or riding a bike downtown.” In terms of Peter’s perception about community, he indicated there is a “core group” of residents who are involved in neighborhood affairs (association meetings, cleanups, gatherings) while the other Old Fourth Ward residents are “generally apath[etic]; everyone wants to make noise when it directly affects them negatively but no one wants to make the noise when it comes to the planning process.” He hopes that the community can advocate for affordable housing and advise the Beltline

“to maintain equity within the communities [to have a] diverse mix of people because the diversity is dwindling.”

Mike and Peter offered contrasting perceptions of their neighborhoods and communities. For Mike, community solidarity has been a defining feature of Virginia-Highland’s past and present whereas Peter notes a “general apathy” in Old Fourth Ward. A promotional tone and phrasing were apparent in both Mike and Peter’s definition of neighborhood and their focus on the Beltline’s positive impacts. When Mike described Virginia-Highland as “a lovely in-town neighborhood with great neighbors and some really nice restaurants,” I interpreted his remark as intentionally dramatized to make a point and expected him to elaborate (it resembled something a real estate agent would say), but he was completely serious and did not explain further. This helps depict the hesitancy of interviewees living near the Eastside Trail to name negative characteristics or effects related to either the Beltline or neighborhood. Peter similarly promoted Old Fourth Ward as the “hottest and trendiest” neighborhood in Atlanta and listed its amenities as reasons to support his claim. Both Mike and Peter expressed intriguing views of place that were disassociated from place history: Mike acknowledged the location of downtown but remarked how more happens in Virginia-Highland and how the neighborhood is “his little place,” meaning he rarely ventures beyond it. Peter celebrated his ability to walk or bike to downtown from Old Fourth Ward when he could not do so before the Eastside Trail. Mike’s comment illustrates how ideologies of place enable neighborhoods to remain white over time. Virginia-Highland has been affluent and white since its founding, which may explain the persistence of its “strong community solidarity.” Mike has not felt the need to leave Virginia-Highland because it has provided

the resources he has required. Race nonetheless shapes Mike's comment because, recalling chapter two, Ponce de Leon segregated neighborhoods where those north of it were white. Referring to chapter two, Old Fourth Ward was predominantly African American before the early 2000s. Atlanta's white elites and politicians have historically attempted to exclude African Americans from downtown (Bayor, 2000; Keating, 2001), and the area's map indicates a tangle of highways isolating downtown from Eastside Trail neighborhoods. Walking to downtown from Old Fourth Ward requires passage through highway underpasses, which have been refuges for individuals experiencing homelessness, or Sweet Auburn, a once thriving hub of African American businesses and entrepreneurs that remained predominantly African American. Atlanta's criminalization of homelessness and attempts to rebrand Sweet Auburn as a historic tourist site has occurred alongside the Beltline's "whitening" of neighborhoods in previously black ones, which may contribute to overall feelings of enhanced security.

In comparing the experiences of West/Southwest Atlanta residents and East Atlanta residents, issues afflicting the neighborhood and their connections to place histories are major differences. The former is struggling with remnants of historical racialized oppression and neglect, which informs contemporary city revitalization efforts that remain racialized but appears less overtly racist. The latter confronts enhanced congestion, which poses harm to pedestrians and serves as a nuisance. While Peter confirmed Old Fourth Ward is more cost-prohibitive due to the Beltline, he disassociates this gentrification from the neighborhood's past as a once African American neighborhood. Whereas several West/Southwest Atlanta residents identified their role as "gentrifiers" in contributing to neighborhood change, none of the seven East Atlanta



residents, similarly to Aluma Farm's volunteers/farmers, considered their own impacts. Relatedly, whereas West/Southwest Atlantans confirmed a distrust of city and ABI officials, East Atlantans expressed their collaborations with "responsive" city council representatives and applauded ABI's efforts in engaging their communities. Ways in which residents portrayed their neighborhoods also varied between West/Southwest and East Atlantans. Neighbors and community solidarity were the primary signifiers of neighborhood for West/ Southwest Atlantans. Although Nora first described Adair Park in aesthetic terms as a "don't judge a book by its cover," she alluded more to how appearances lead "outsiders" to underestimate her neighborhood.

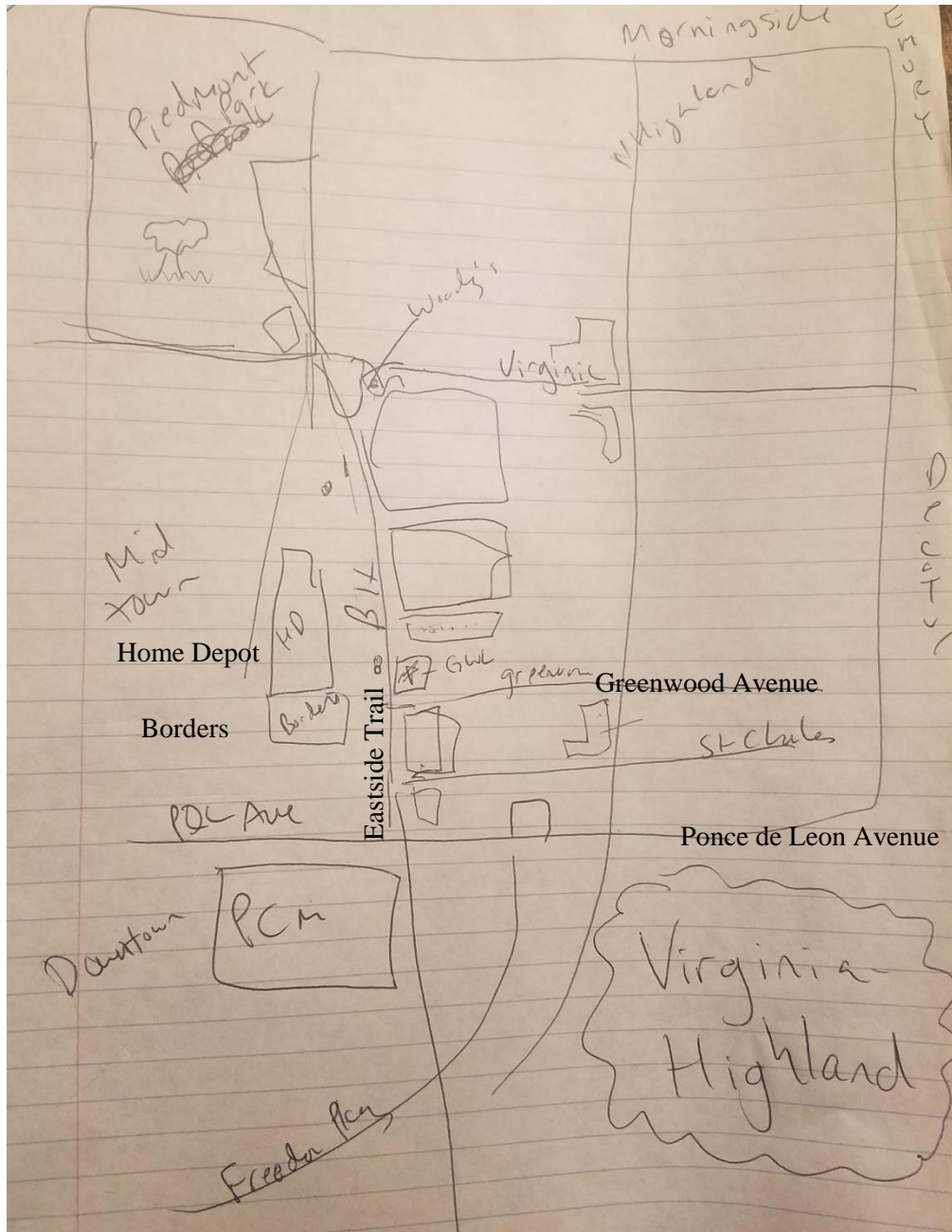


Figure 6.1 Virginia-Highland Map Created by Resident (Mike, 2018)



Figure 6.2 Greenwood Avenue NE Access Point (Google Maps, 2018)

## CHAPTER 7

### WALKING THE EASTSIDE TRAIL

#### 7.1 OBSERVATIONS OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

The Eastside Trail was the Beltline's first completed section, opening in 2012. Since then, it has experienced two southern extension phases: the first phase was completed in November 2017 while the second (and last) phase began July 2018 with anticipated termination in Fall 2019 (Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2019). Various retail, restaurants, grocery stores, and live-work-play residences surround the Eastside Trail. The Eastside Trail has served as a model for other trail sections, demonstrating the Beltline's possibilities of spurring economic development. In 2016, 1.6 million people visited the trail; the number of annual visitors has likely increased due to the trail's expansion (Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2016). As the Beltline's most popular and recognized trail (for both locals and tourists), ABI advertises the Eastside Trail more than the Westside Trail. For example, ABI's main webpage prominently features an image of the Eastside Trail (section near Piedmont Park) with midtown and a sunset as its backdrop with "Explore the Atlanta Beltline" written in bold colorful letters (Figure 7.1). In the Beltline's annual report for 2018, fourteen images are associated with the Eastside Trail while eight images are associated with the Westside Trail.

Walking the Eastside Trail is taxing depending on the time of day; weekends during warm temperatures are particularly crowded beginning at 9 am whereas there are less users on weekday mornings and afternoons. Unlike the Westside Trail, I was rarely

greeted by other users. In fact, I recall a greeting from only one person throughout my observations; he was a sixty-year-old African American man who would shout out “hola” as he zoomed by me on roller skates every afternoon I traveled the trail. Also contrasting from the Westside Trail, the Eastside Trail’s access points are more inaccessible because they are stairs instead of ramps. ABI sponsors free weekly fitness classes on both the Eastside and Westside Trails, though most fitness classes are offered in Eastside Trail locations. Historic Fourth Ward Skatepark is one such location, featuring a multi-use field (Figure 7.2). Yoga is the most attended fitness class, which is typically offered on Tuesday or Sunday evenings. One Tuesday evening during a yoga class at the multi-use field, I stumbled upon an informal dance group at the opposite end of the field (Figure 7.3); eight African American individuals in their mid-twenties to mid-forties comprised the group (3 women and five men). A speaker playing hip-hop music from the 1980s and 90s competed with the music blaring from the yoga class’ speakers. Each person jumped in as another stepped out from the middle of the group to free-style dance with encouragement from the other dancers. A white man who appeared to be homeless approached the group and watched from the side, moving slightly to the music, until one of the men welcomed the newcomer with a fist bump and “hey man.” This group is memorable because it depicts the Beltline’s infinite contradictions of bringing people together. Yoga class participants are predominantly white women who require a mat to participate; at least thirty people attend these classes, so they are highly visible from the trail. At the opposite end of the park farthest from the trail, a group of friends gathered together for an impromptu dance session and welcomed anyone who wanted to join. The

group's composition stands in contrast to the yoga class, suggesting a lack of resonance of ABI-hosted fitness classes among all Atlantans.

## **7.2 EASTSIDE BIKE TOUR**

ABP, the entity responsible for obtaining private funds for the Beltline, offers free three-hour bike tours through trails and neighborhoods every Saturday morning, alternating between the Westside and Eastside Trails each weekend. Arriving early at the tour's meeting point, I conversed with Tracy, a white thirty-year-old woman who is a resident of West End and served as the tour guide. She expressed her dislike of leading the Eastside Trail tour compared to the Westside tour because it is always crowded on Saturdays, so "there's no time to take it all in." Twelve participants, including myself, gathered at a bike share station near the Eastside Trail's first southern expansion. John, a white fifty-year-old man who serves as ABP's engagement coordinator, joined the group sporting a t-shirt inscribed with a bike and "Atlanta Beltline" logo a few minutes after everyone introduced themselves. Out of the twelve participants (equal number of women and men), there were two Latinx, one African American, and the rest white. Most participants live in the northern suburbs of Atlanta. Tracy explained trail safety and courtesy guidelines before we began, such as notifying other users with "on your left," "stopping," or riding one behind another in single file to consume less trail space.

Throughout the tour, Tracy would indicate to the person behind her to shout "stopping" to signal participants to stop. At every stop, Tracy shared information about particular sites or general information about the project's history or the Beltline's current and future plans. In contrast to the Westside Walking Tour, Tracy provided a more comprehensive perspective of the Beltline, including challenges posed by lack of funding

and land ownership, lack of affordable housing, and impact of rising property values. At Freedom Parkway's underpass, Tracy briefly discussed the significance of rising property values to the neighborhood in which we stood: "We're in Old Fourth Ward, a former predominantly African American neighborhood, that warns us of the Beltline's consequences and gentrification." John, ABP's engagement coordinator, would often interrupt Tracy to negate such statements that positioned the Beltline in a negative light with positive benefits and statistics, such as how much money the Beltline and its associated development has generated to "improve" the area.

Despite John's interruptions, Tracy continued to present the Beltline's complex story and prioritized the racialized histories of particular neighborhoods. As we traversed Reynoldstown, a neighborhood surrounding the first phase of the Eastside Trail's extension, Tracy mentioned it began as a neighborhood for former slaves after the Civil War. The neighborhood is named after Madison Reynolds, an African American landowner, who established the first store in the area for African Americans because Cabbagetown, its bordering neighborhood and closest grocery store, denied African Americans from entering the neighborhood. I greatly welcomed this history since information about Reynoldstown is not widely available. Moreover, the tour rode through streets traversing parts of Old Fourth Ward farther from the trail and stopped at a parking lot in front of Ebenezer Baptist Church (where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sr. served as preachers) in Sweet Auburn. Atlanta's streetcar rattled past us a few seconds later. Tracy used that opportunity to discuss the city's efforts to "revitalize" Sweet Auburn and articulated the contradictions of such initiatives. Similarly to Old Fourth Ward, Tracy specified the neighborhood's name and introduced it as a once-prominent area of African

American entrepreneurs, musicians, professionals, comparing it to the Harlem Renaissance. Then, she asked us to look around at the homelessness and neglected homes /streets around the area so closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement to consider one of the Beltline's failure. Also implicating the City of Atlanta, Tracy emphasized how the city's "revitalization" plans like the streetcar are designed to generate economic growth and branding, as confirmed by the streetcar's routes to tourist destinations, rather than for meeting the transportation needs of existing residents. Upon the tour's conclusion, Tracy encouraged participants to become educated and involved in Beltline affairs to make the Beltline truly accessible to all and hold ABI/ ABP/ City of Atlanta accountable.

### **7.3 PHOTO WALK**

Atlanta Film Photographers regularly meets at various locations in Atlanta for photo walks. One of the organizers, Dave, arranged a photo walk on the Eastside Trail. Including Dave, thirty-nine amateur and professional photographers gathered in Ponce City Market's patio area on a Saturday morning in early August. Participating photographers varied in sociodemographic characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, age); most could be categorized as millennials sporting multiple brand camera accessories, indicating their status as a professional photographer. As we waited until 9 am for others to join, individuals exited the building with iced lattes in hand, rolled yoga mats to their side, and disgruntled facial expressions at having to navigate through the crowd of photographers, a sign of what was to come on the trail itself. As the photographers waited and interacted with familiar and new faces, a security guard approached the group with a curious expression to inquire about the reason for our large group. Since Ponce City



Market is private property, it would be expected that such a large group would attract attention.

Once on the trail heading south toward Krog Street Market, one of the few places on the trail where visitors may use the restroom and drink water without necessarily being a customer, we walked two-by-two in a row along the trail's right edge. Like all Saturday mornings, the trail was crowded at 9 am. Apparently, I was not the only one who feared breaking the Beltline's norms. A man and woman walked beside a three-year-old and five-year-old boy on scooters as the woman reminded them to stay to the right where they would be out of people's way. The younger boy abruptly stopped in the middle of the trail, prompting judgmental facial expressions from those who were following closely behind as the boy momentarily disrupted their travels. Consequently, the man took away the scooter from the boy and scolded him for failing to stop in the grass far from the trail.

Saturdays are days where mass numbers of tourists explore the trail. Tourists are noticeable because they carry professional cameras, wear baseball caps or visors, or stand in the middle of the trail or sidelines mesmerized by their surroundings. Groups of unaccompanied children and adolescents walked in the opposite direction toward Ponce City Market; perhaps parents feel more comfortable allowing their children to use the trail unaccompanied if they anticipate high usage because I did not see unaccompanied children during weekdays at times most individuals are working. Beltline etiquette came second to crafting the perfect shot; the thirty-eight individuals around me could care less about walking too slowly or abruptly stopping and blocking others from passing to take a picture. Upon arriving at Fourth Ward Skate Park, the two-by-two order broke into

various directions; the group spent the most time taking pictures of the skate park and Freedom Parkway's underpass, which was unsurprising given the popularity of these two sites where individuals take selfies and family pictures. My fellow photographers were particularly drawn to capturing images of a twelve-year-old girl dressed in a ballet leotard, tulle skirt, and slippers. The girl performed ballet movements on top of a skateboard vertical ramp (the location of the turf war discussed in chapter two) as a woman holding a professional camera instructed her to pose in certain ways. Skateboarders and midtown's skyline served as a backdrop. Neither the girl nor the woman seemed to notice the swarm of photographers surrounding them. Beyond the uniqueness of the ballerina's photo shoot, the fact that the group devoted the most time to the bridge and skate park demonstrated a common pattern in which these two locations are hotspots for photos. This reveals a new fascination with "urban" aesthetics. What was previously regarded as negative, skateboarding and graffiti, now represents new meanings, prompting two questions: What do individuals who do not live in the area assume of these spaces? How are the spaces most popular for photography reinforce certain narratives of the Eastside Trail?

#### **7.4 BRICKWORKS GALLERY**

"Brickworks Gallery is dedicated to showcasing the work of talented and inspired artists whose work tells compelling stories...Knight's goal in [Walking the ATL] paintings is to capture Atlanta's sunny, upbeat and promising mood." (Brickworks Gallery, 2018)

As previous chapters and the preceding section indicate, photography is another form of visual representation of place, particularly because it is a more inclusive form of artistic expression and readily available for propagation on social media. This section

expands upon the visual representation of place by concentrating on Emma Knight's *Walking the ATL* collection displayed in Brickworks Gallery. Brickworks Gallery, established in 2016, is located in "an historical industrial-era building" near one of the Beltline's access points in Virginia Highland, the affluent neighborhood situated near the Eastside Trail. As a non-Atlantan native, Knight took hundreds of photographs of various city spaces. From these photographs as points of reference, Knight converted them into paintings designed "to capture Atlanta's sunny, upbeat and promising mood." Importantly, the "compelling story" captured in *Walking the ATL* advances the narrative of fragmented perceptions of neighborhoods and overemphasizes certain "go to" locations in Atlanta, omitting other areas (South, Southwest, West Atlanta). In other words, Knight's collection advances the story propagated by Beltline officials: an ahistorical, apolitical Beltline acting as positive, transformative force.

After spotting a sign advertising its location from the trail one Wednesday afternoon, I ventured past the access point and quickly located the brick building. Brian, an African American twenty-four-year-old and gallery owner's assistant, greeted me and motioned to a spot on the floor to indicate where I could place my backpack since I was the only other person in the gallery. Knight's *Walking the ATL* collection was prominently displayed near the gallery's entrance. Many of the paintings depicted iconic scenes representing neighborhoods that are relatively gentrified (4 out of 14 paintings), including Virginia-Highland, or common features found along the Eastside trail (7 out of 14 paintings), such as Ponce City Market, Old Fourth Ward Tower, Krog Street Tunnel, and Fourth Ward Park. One painting featured Ebenezer Baptist Church, which as mentioned in the preceding section, is associated with the Old Fourth Ward's role in the

Civil Rights Movement. Knight's paintings did not represent Westside or Southside neighborhoods or locations, apart from Grant Park, a gentrifying neighborhood in South Atlanta. An absence of people was another notable theme among the paintings, though there is one painting depicting people on the Eastside Trail (Figure 7.4) and Ponce de Leon Avenue's section adjacent to Ponce City Market (Figure 7.5). Presenting peopleless places normalizes the depicted landscapes, disassociating them from the sociopolitical relations shaping these landscapes and how these landscapes, in turn, shape those relations.

Brian returned after five minutes to ask about my opinion so far and how I learned about the gallery. He further explained that Knight is not from Atlanta, basing her paintings on photos she took during her visits to the city. Therefore, I partly understand why Knight focused on some places over others. Finally, Brian, who recently moved to Atlanta from Brooklyn, inquired more about the history of Virginia-Highland and Old Fourth Ward. He currently lives in Bankhead, a neighborhood in Atlanta's westside that has gained a negative reputation as a crime hotspot and revealed his frustration with the misconceptions associated with Bankhead and its residents. According to Brian, Bankhead's strong sense of community is its most valuable resource; neighbors look out for one another and offer opportunities for mobility that would not exist beyond Bankhead's boundaries. Unfortunately, like other Westside and Southside neighborhoods, Bankhead's community empowerment remains overlooked among the limited narratives of poverty, crime, and deprivation imposed by outsiders.

## **7.5 FOURTH WARD NEIGHBORS PORCH PARTY**

Each month, Fourth Ward Neighbors hosts a potluck gathering, referred to as a porch party, primarily for Old Fourth Ward residents, but the event is open to anyone who is involved with the neighborhood association. These porch parties and other events are advertised on the association's Facebook page. As indicated in chapter two, Old Fourth Ward is divided into four sections with separate neighborhood associations representing each section: Fourth Ward Neighbors, Fourth Ward Alliance, Fourth Ward West, and Sweet Auburn Neighborhood District (SAND). Fourth Ward Neighbors is bounded by Freedom Parkway and DeKalb Ave, Boulevard and the Beltline.

Arya, one of the association members I interviewed, invited me to August's porch party as an opportunity to meet and speak with residents to learn about their experiences in an informal setting. Members of the neighborhood association alternate responsibilities for hosting the porch party each month. August's party was located in a townhome near an Eastside Trail access point (Irwin Street). Upon ringing the doorbell, I was warmly greeted by a guest and led into the living room filled with about twelve people engaged in conversations. As I headed toward the kitchen, I noticed that the guests were white and in their thirties through fifties, except for one woman who was African American and an older couple in their late sixties accompanied by their one-year-old grandson. Six additional guests were sitting in the dining/ kitchen area. Among them was Jerry, one of the hosts, who introduced himself, welcomed me into his home, and motioned toward the dinner table to place my pie among the other dishes.

Cindy, an Old Fourth Ward resident who lives in an area that corresponds with Fourth Ward Alliance, approached me and inquired where in the neighborhood I live, so I

explained Arya's invitation and my intention on meeting Old Fourth Ward residents. Cindy seemed nonchalant about the fact I was not from Atlanta as she shared upcoming neighborhood events she helped organize that would contribute to my study, such as Taste of Old Fourth Ward and Old Fourth Ward Fest. Jerry then emerged back into the kitchen to introduce me to his wife, Carol, who discussed her framed photographs, which she had taken during her travels as a photographer in a former life. Jerry and Carol moved to Old Fourth Ward three years ago when John relocated to Atlanta's Center for Disease Control; they have been involved with the neighborhood association since their first month in Atlanta. The strong sense of community and convenient location of their new townhome were primary motivations behind their decision to choose Old Fourth Ward. Many of the guests with whom I spoke had lived in the neighborhood for a relatively short time of three or less years. Guests seemed to be childless or had adult children living elsewhere. One couple, first time porch party guests, recently moved from Marietta, a suburb north of Atlanta. In the ways individuals informally interacted with others, it seems those involved with Fourth Ward Neighbors regularly gather together as there is a sense of familiarity among them.

Toward the last fifteen minutes before the event's posted end time, Jerry invited the remaining guests to sit in the living room, including him, Carol, Ivan (a Georgia Tech professor from Sweden), and myself. Ivan briefly mentioned the Beltline as he asked John and Carol about their experience living so close to it and how they tolerated the congestion of outsiders. In response, Jerry admitted his frustration over the endless stream of cars that consume resident parking space or speed through Irwin Street, which

makes him reluctant to walk in the neighborhood.<sup>27</sup> He also did not exaggerate the Beltline's centrality in his life, which I found to be a common theme among residents living near the Eastside Trail. Instead, he rarely has time to use it except for the occasional bike ride or date night stroll. The conversation then spontaneously transformed into an improv strategy session in which we discussed ways the city could increase public or non-motorized transportation usage. Ivan lived in Portland for a few years, so he shared his experiences with working with the city as it launched its street car. Instead of cycling on the Beltline, Ivan prefers to use the PATH trail that is more expansive and less congested. PATH foundation is one of ABI and ABP's partners; it is a non-profit organization that has constructed 260 miles of trails in Georgia, including a trail system in Atlanta that connects with Beltline Trails. According to Ivan, the city simply needs to promote other bike and pedestrian trails, add safety features such as lights, and create signs to orient users. Jerry and Carol attributed low MARTA ridership to its limited routes, unattractive conditions of bus and train stations, and overall lack of motivation among Atlantans to pressure the city in expanding and improving transit. When asked about my opinion, I began to refer to MARTA's racialized history and associated fears invoked with plans to expand its services to new areas. Carol abruptly stood up, collected plates from the living room coffee table, and announced she would be cleaning up the dining area as she walked toward the kitchen, ending the strategy session and signaling a change in topic to Ivan's research at Georgia Tech. Since MARTA's inception in the 1960s, its acronym has been altered to "Moving Africans Rapidly

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<sup>27</sup> The townhome faces Irwin Street, a two-way road. Along both sides of the road, on-street parallel parking is available. This road is often dangerous to traverse since many cars drive past the 4-way stop sign.

Through Atlanta,” carrying racialized implications and framing MARTA as a “second-rate” transportation option that remains today (Binkovitz, 2017; Godwin, 2018).

Conversations about race or topics that invoke racialized histories, as the tension between Tracey and John and the sudden shift in conversation at the porch party reveal, are met with antagonistic responses. As several South/Southwest Atlanta residents alluded to, racism of the past and its implications in the present as a form of color-blindness<sup>28</sup> are ignored, contributing to the maintenance of racial oppression. Similarly, the Beltline’s narrative of racial reconciliation and unity without attending to the permeance of racial ideology and acknowledging the ways the past continues to shape the present indicates the limitation of this inclusive goal, which the next chapter will explain.



Figure 7.1 Image of Eastside Trail on ABI Homepage  
(Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2019)

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<sup>28</sup> Color-blind racism permeates contemporary U.S society; white [individuals] diminish the influence of race, and racial inequality is normalized by ascribing racial matters as “product[s] of (nonracial market) dynamics (Bonilla-Silva, 2001: 78). As a dominant ideology, color-blind racism shapes the politics of possibilities and provides a “rational” organization of difference. Abstract liberalism is an element of color-blind racism that most accompanies urban greening projects. It uses “ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity’) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism)” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018: 200).



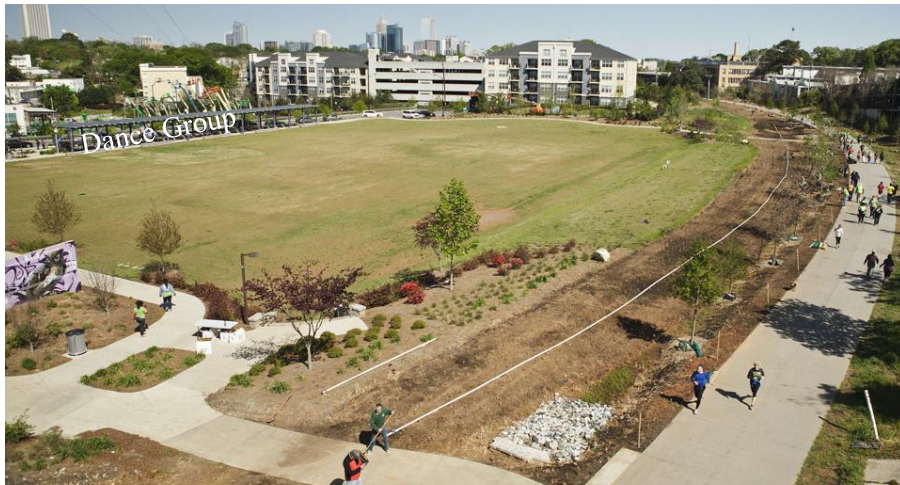


Figure 7.2 Fourth Ward Skatepark Multi-Use Field (Atlanta Beltline Inc., 2019)



Figure 7.3 Dance Group in Fourth Ward Skatepark (Martinez, 2018)

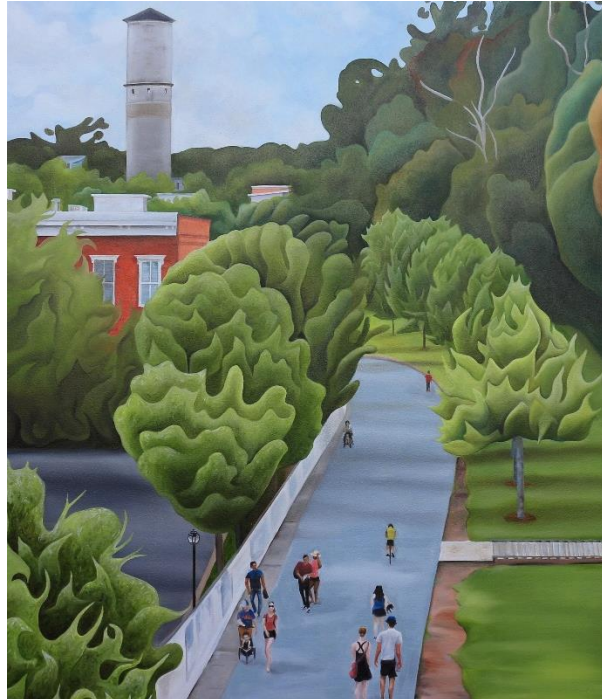


Figure 7.4 *Old Fourth Ward Tower*, Emma Knight (O'Neill, 2018)



Figure 7.5 *Ponce City Market*, Emma Knight (O'Neill, 2018)

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION—ABI'S BELTLINE

“The city recognizes the importance of community involvement in the Beltline implementation process as well as the importance of balanced and equitable development of the city in a manner that preserves the dignity of existing residents and ensures equal participation by all residents in the many benefits, both direct and indirect” (Atlanta City Council, 2006)

In July 2006, Atlanta City Counsel signed Ordinance 06-R-1576 (“Framework for Citizen Participation”), establishing the community engagement framework (CEF), which outlines mandated processes for involving residents in the Beltline’s planning and implementation (Figure 8.1). The framework mandated the formation of various committees, positions, and events; I will discuss the following while recognizing there are other elements in the framework that are beyond the scope of this study: Beltline Affordable Housing Advisory Board (BAHAB), quarterly meetings, and study groups based on neighborhood subarea designation. Roy (2015) warns that urban redevelopment projects advertising collaborative and inclusive planning tend to prioritize neoliberal ideals that constrain the political power of “the public.” She argues that the Beltline’s CEF reinforces existing power relations, “protect[s] market-centric state agenda[s], ...and...consolidate[s]...neoliberal governance” (Roy, 2015: 59). Collaborative planning processes enable dialogue among a restricted number of experts while preventing adversarial challenges to current socio-political relations through a reliance on consensual

politics, promoting pseudo-participation. Although the CEF mandates methods for community engagement to achieve one of the Beltline's core values of equity and "suit the needs of every Atlantan" (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., 2018a: 2), these mandated methods constrain participation through their structures, interactions, or arrangements. Underlying the Beltline's CEF are assumptions regarding a predetermined and universal meaning/representation of participation or engagement and oversight regarding knowledge production. Neglecting the various social, material, and ideological barriers that may alienate some Atlantans over others renders intentions of equal participation and equitable development meaningless as the on-the-ground realities never align with intention.

In early June, ABI hosted its second quarterly meeting of the year at a church in West Atlanta on a Tuesday evening. As I made my way to the worship hall, I noticed groups gathered around posters displaying Beltline areal maps that were propped up on easels around the lobby. The worship hall eventually accommodated approximately 350 individuals who were seated around blue-table clothed circular tables in groups of 8. There were six individuals sharing the table with me: three white women and one white man who live near the Eastside Trail, one African American woman who lives in West Atlanta, and another African American woman who works in the City's Office of Resilience. Coincidentally, my first ABI meeting was one in which Keisha Lance Bottoms, Atlanta's mayor, would be in attendance. Beyond the typical question/answer and update portion, the meeting would feature a panel on equity. Interactions between ABI employees and attendees was not apparent, excluding one of the community

engagement managers who was in the lobby speaking with others; instead, most employees were standing near the left side of the stage conversing amongst themselves.

Introductions from two city council members commenced the meeting. Cleta Winslow, a city council member, informed the audience about Invest Atlanta's (Atlanta's economic development agency) new program, which provides funds to homeowners who want/need to renovate "run down" homes. Winslow described this program as "a way to express that "[the city is] listening to [them]," and as an opportunity to keep existing residents and attract new ones because "[existing residents] are the ones that are really attracting other people from outside the city." Ivory Young Jr., another city council member, summarized the challenges that West Atlanta is experiencing where "over 80% of its land is investor-owned...less than 10% of that is owner-occupied." Young Jr. continued but appeared to speak directly to ABI and associated partners as he expressed his concern about displacement and disempowerment: "I'm asking the Beltline to consider...opportunities to freeze taxes, relieve the anxieties of existing residents along the Beltline... so that existing, indigenous, legacy residents don't have to feel the bite of increased property pressure. Who saw Wakanda? [M]ost of us fear, when the colonizers come, that they really won't embrace the indigenous residents of our village and they won't empower them to be self-determined."

Young Jr.'s words were particularly memorable because he is directly calling ABI out as a contributor to displacement and gentrification even though he was a city council member. Although I had heard the term "colonizer" used in the context of urban gentrifiers, this was the first circumstance where I heard the term "indigenous" to describe long-term and native Atlantans. Young Jr.'s reference to Black Panther added

another layer of context and specification: colonizers are white while indigenous residents are African American. Wakanda, in the movie, is a fictional Black nation that avoided European colonization. Eventually, after a period of isolationism, interest over Wakanda's natural resources threatens its sovereignty. In this example, settler colonialism's element of invasion as a structure rather than an event is apparent (Wolfe, 2006). Indigenous in this context refers to the right of native Atlantans, who have been historically abandoned by the city, as the resident interviews and historical context demonstrate, to not only remain in place but also to retain their self-determination and existing social support systems. Colonizers' access to desired land near the Beltline trails is the primary threat to displacement, which first involves the devaluation of property and people in West/ Southwest/ South Atlanta and the subsequent overwriting of place histories/ meanings. Several members of the audience communicated their approval and support throughout Young Jr.'s speech while ABI employees standing in a line near the stage's left stairs and facing the audience appeared uncomfortable.

Reid, a senior community planner, facilitated the meeting's Q & A segment. A middle-aged African American man asked for clarification related to affordable housing using public funds. Vaughn, Vice President of Housing Policy and Development, answered with statistics about the number of affordable units constructed or in planning stages. The man who asked the question appeared confused as he asked for the microphone, though Reid intervened and insisted on "one question per person." A seventy-year-old African American woman inquired about ABI's accommodation for senior-accessible transportation and housing, "particularly indigenous residents." Owens, ABI's principal engineer, explained how the trail's access points are ADA-accessible and

ABI's attempts at "providing connectivity to city streets where [they] can." Vaughn expanded upon housing, mentioning ABI's new senior community project, Adair Court, to emphasize ABI's prioritization of senior needs. Another African American woman and West Atlanta resident expressed her disappointment in the Westside Trail's quality and lack of diversity among trail workers. Though she did not clarify, the woman suggests there are few maintenance workers who are not Latino (and thus not residents of neighborhoods located near the Westside Trail since few, if any, Latinx communities are situated in Atlanta's boundaries). Owens subtly reinforced this suggestion when she specified that ABI strives to mandate contractors to hire "local" construction workers. This concern would later resonate with me in my Westside Trail observations during which I noticed a large number of Latino trail workers as I contemplated how the Beltline's built environment is produced and for whom. There were seven total questions; all individuals from the audience who spoke were African American residents living in Atlanta's west, southwest, or south neighborhoods.

These questions and responses provide some insight into the competing conceptualizations of community engagement and participation among "the public" and Beltline/city employees. Responses to the seven questions were generic and consciously crafted to appease. As demonstrated in the first example, the meeting did not provide opportunities for follow up questions and clarifications. Questions or comments that were not addressed during the Q&A and panel session were collected on paper at meeting's conclusion; these questions and answers were published on ABI's website about one month later, which reflected the pattern of responses from the Q & A (failure to respond directly to the question and promotion of the Beltline's benefits with statistics).

Occurring on an evening in late June in West Atlanta (Hagar's Palace), the Westside Study Group—a mandated event, based on feedback from two previous Westside Study Group meetings, was hosted to receive public input regarding street and park design as well as land use proposals. Posters located throughout the room were revised versions from the previous two meetings; participants would have an opportunity to identify excluded factors, provide feedback, and receive clarification that would then shape the posters for the upcoming fourth meeting. The main room where the meeting was held resembled the set-up of the quarterly meeting: circular tables and easels displaying posters lined near the room's walls, though these posters depicted land use goals/strategies and maps of future land use, bike/pedestrian plan, street frameworks relevant to subareas 9 and 10. Approximately one hundred attendees were present, most of whom were African American and older adults in their 30s through 60s. Two white Atlanta police officers stood out; both were seated perusing the meeting agenda. Groups of people were circulating around the room analyzing the posters. Beltline Study Groups are the only CEF meetings where attendees actually participate in the project's planning by providing feedback and interacting with others (attendees and Beltline officials). Despite its facilitation of participatory planning, Study Group engagement is limited to superficial decisions related to park or street design, and there are no ways to confirm that ABI and city leaders are considering participant feedback. Beyond Study Groups, ABI meetings are rarely attended, perhaps because they are often hostile against public attendees and restrict public participation to a two-minute question, which categorizes the meeting I describe below.



In August, I attended the Beltline Affordable Housing Advisory Board (BAHAB) meeting held at the ABI offices in downtown Atlanta (Figure 8.2), about 1.5 miles from an Eastside Trail access point. August's BAHAB meeting was memorable because it exemplified the tensions of race and neighborhood identities. Upon entering the building's lobby, a security guard at the front desk asked for my driver's license and called ABI's office to confirm the meeting. I ascended to ABI's floor and was greeted by a woman sitting behind a desk near the offices' entrance. An ABI employee prior to the meeting actually noticed my presence. Vaughn, ABI's Vice President of Housing Policy and Development, approached me to introduce himself. As he shook my hand, Vaughn mentioned he recognized me from previous meetings and wondered if I was a student. Twelve members were present with a fairly equal number of women and men (six African American, five white, one Latina). For this meeting, the room's arrangement is particularly relevant. The room that accommodates committee meetings has designated tables for board members arranged into a rectangle at the front of the room facing the projector screen. Public seating is separately arranged into rows near the room's entrance facing the projector. Thus, the public often faces the backs of board members (Figure 8.3). These meetings typically allocate time for public commentary on the agenda, but that day, public commentary had been excluded. Whitney offered that the group vote to either allow the commentary or proceed with the agenda. Every member voted to allow the commentary. Whitney then clarified that each person would have approximately two minutes to speak. Three individuals, including myself, formed the public. Rick, a white man in his late 50s and Inman Park resident, expressed his concern over a lack of affordable housing in a predominantly African American neighborhood on Atlanta's

Westside. One of the board members, an African American man, asked Rick if he lived in the neighborhood. Rick hesitantly responded by shaking his head no and shared his place of residence. The board member then stated, “Oh, so you don’t actually live in the neighborhood,” which I interpreted as dismissive and accusatory. Consequently, Rick attempted to defend his concern by describing his involvement in the community. Meanwhile, the board chair, who had his back toward the public, addressed Rick without turning around. This meeting illustrates the racial tensions embodied in the interaction between a member of the community and an ABI committee member that reflect the anxieties of white newcomers that West/Southwest residents shared with me. African American resentment and suspicion of white individuals and vice versa are discursive interactions and formations that the Beltline’s CEF is unequipped to accommodate. When the public offers questions or concerns, Beltline officials respond with statistical information that often fail to answer questions, or their response may challenge the commentator’s validity. Expertise, knowledge, and authority shape interactions, meeting dates, seating and room arrangements, meeting structures, advisory board appointments, and promotional materials, that may impede or promote the participation of some over others. These processes assume that providing the “public” with more agency in community affairs results in more equality and that participation follows a predetermined trajectory.

### **8.1 THE BELTLINE’S FUTURE?**

“Worldwide, the Atlanta BeltLine is looked at as a project that is cutting-edge in infrastructure quality, sustainability practices, and innovative solutions—and we are not even close to finished yet!” (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., 2018a: 2)

As the quote indicates, ABI and city leaders refer to the Beltline as a nationally and globally-renowned project. Indeed, at the second quarterly meeting of 2018 in June, Atlanta's mayor promoted the Beltline's development as the "envy across the nation" and mentioned leaders of cities outside the U.S. that are eager to learn more about the Beltline as a model of urban sustainable development. Considering the anxieties and contradictions associated with the Beltline, the phrase "we are not even close to finished yet!" is foreboding, especially since the project's completion date is in eleven years. City and Beltline officials envision the Beltline as a "new public meeting ground" that will eventually connect forty-five neighborhoods with the same rails that once served as racialized barriers upon the project's completion (Gravel, 2016: 78). In reality, ABI's "community engagement" planning processes enable dialogue among a restricted number of experts while preventing adversarial challenges to current socio-political relations. These forces remain normalized and unchallenged, threatening to displace historically marginalized residents, erase existing narratives of place/ neighborhood identity, and exacerbate inequality.

My thesis demonstrates that, similarly to urban greening projects from the past, as the literature review in chapter one makes clear, sanitized aesthetics and orderly landscapes underlie the Beltline project, reinforcing hegemonic power relations and exclusive ideologies through expectations of appropriate use and representation of place. Rather than prioritizing community engagement in its planning and implementation, the Beltline erases the political subject in favor of consensus based on "the common good," diminishing the voices of opponents and representing the post-political condition of neoliberal governance that typically categorizes contemporary urban sustainability

projects. The Beltline's landscape, like all landscapes, obscures the sources and conditions of its production, which normalizes racial inequalities and places (Mitchell, 2003)

Contradictions in senses of place and imaginaries over Atlanta's future influence memories of the past and perceptions of the present. These contradictions resonate throughout all chapters of this thesis. Nora, president of Adair Park, exemplifies this point when she expressed how many of her neighbors do not yet know what it means to live by the Beltline. She alluded to Atlanta's inability to meaningfully engage with the city's racialized past and how it continues to facilitate the mobility of white individuals and constrain racial minorities. Variation in how a place's past and present should be represented is evident in instances where the location or mode of public art as well as the artist's positionality (and thus authority to represent) become sources of contestation. A misalignment between stated intentions and outcome embodies another contradiction among the chapters; Aluma Farm, ABI's community meetings, and the contrasting experiences of Southwest/South Atlanta and East Atlanta residents are primary examples of such misalignment. The Beltline has been instrumental in initiating alternative narratives about the identity and representation of Atlanta's neighborhoods due to its capacity to mobilize proponents (and resources) under a collective vision of economic, "sustainable," and equitable development and its ability to sanction a sense of place that align with this image. For African American residents with memories of overtly racialized urban renewal and violent enforcement of segregation, among other processes that restricted and continue to confine their mobility and claims making processes, the Beltline's vision is illusory. As Walter and Nora warned, unless ABI and City of Atlanta

rethink their priorities and ways in which residents engage with the project, the remaining trail sections will be replicates of the Eastside Trail. Rather than helping Atlanta overcome its histories of segregation and racial oppression, the Beltline is likely to seal its fate as a reproduction of these histories, albeit under a regime of a normalized racial divide

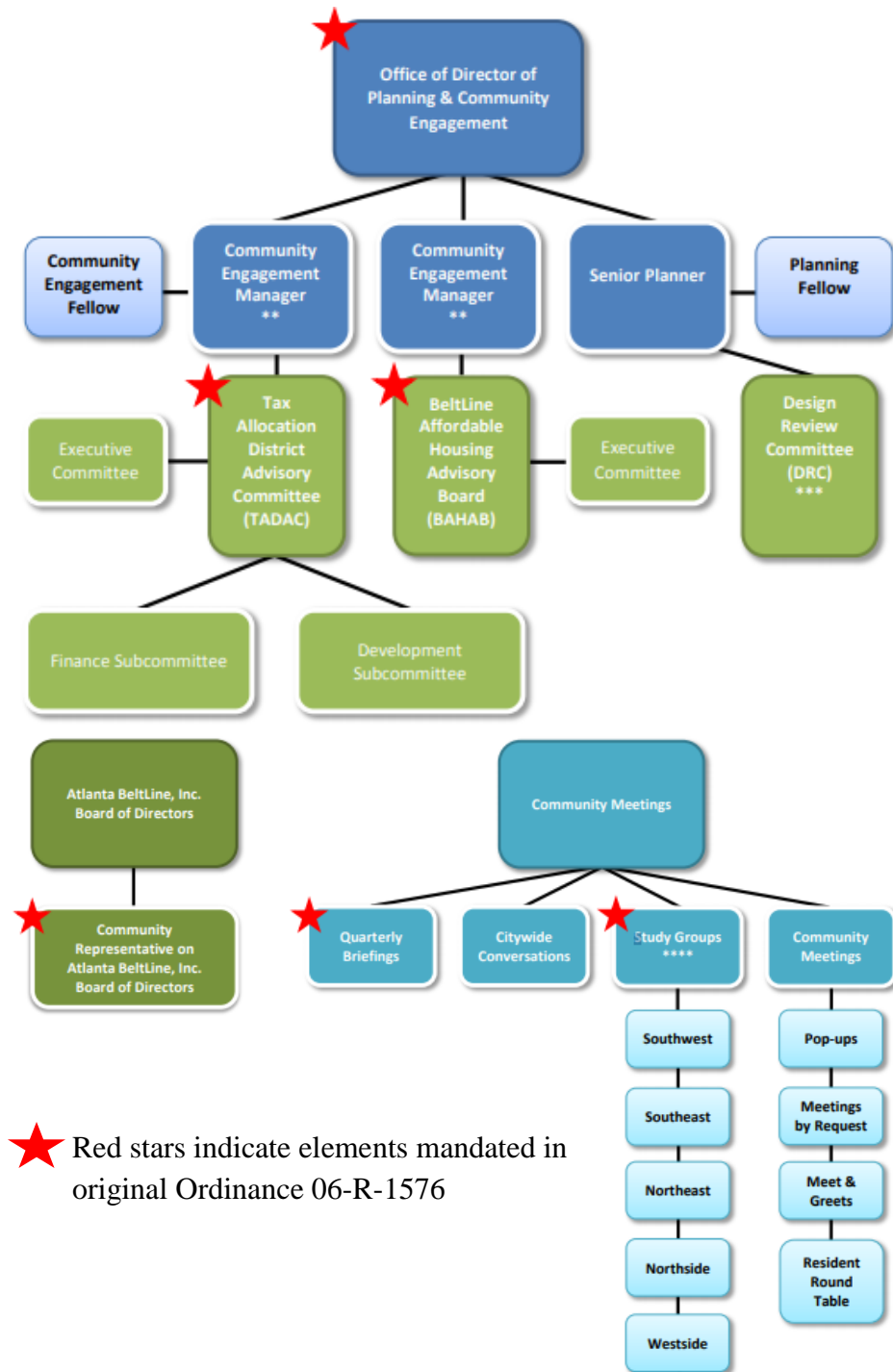


Figure 8.1 Beltline Community Engagement Framework (Atlanta Beltline, Inc., 2019)

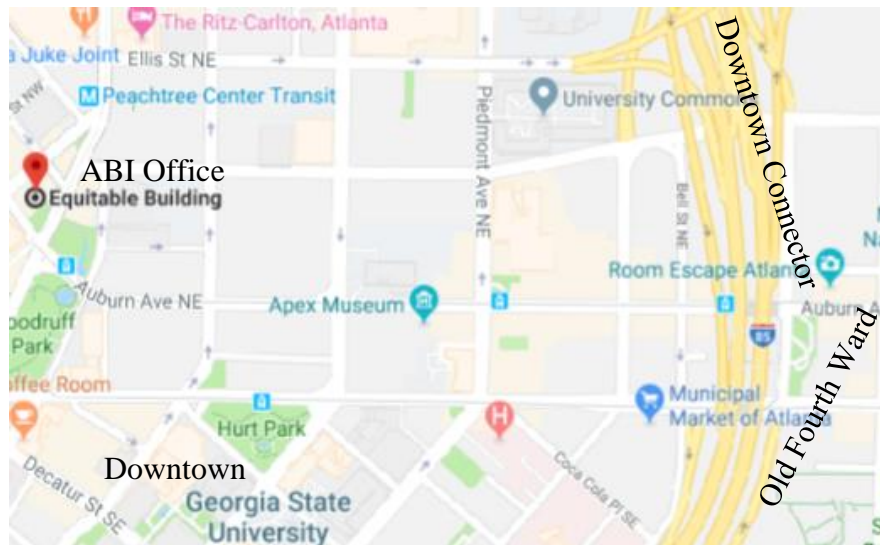


Figure 8.2 ABI Office Location (Google Maps, 2019)



Figure 8.3 ABI Meeting Room (Martinez, 2018)

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