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Race, Place, and Politics: Urban Renewal, Redevelopment, and Stories of the Historic Buttermilk Bottom Neighborhood in Atlanta

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RACE, PLACE, AND POLITICS: URBAN RENEWAL, REDEVELOPMENT,
AND STORIES OF THE HISTORIC BUTTERMILK BOTTOM NEIGHBORHOOD
IN ATLANTA

by

JOHN E. WILLIAMS

Under the Direction of Katherine Hankins, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place. In particular, I focus on Buttermilk Bottom, the neighborhood formerly centered on the present location of the Atlanta Civic Center. Drawing on oral histories collected from former residents, historical newspaper accounts, archival materials, redevelopment plans, I trace the discourses about Buttermilk Bottom from the mid-twentieth century to the present, demonstrating ways in which Buttermilk Bottom was discursively constructed as a place of community for neighborhood residents, as a “slum” in need of revitalization by city planners and

developers, and as prized real estate to be exploited for economic gain. These competing discourses, which were often highly racialized, reveal the complicated annihilation of memory and meaning over time. Ultimately, this research can provide a lens to view, frame—and challenge—contemporary discussions about redevelopment and preservation for intown Atlanta’s valued commercial and residential real estate.

INDEX WORDS: Race, Place, Buttermilk Bottom, Urban Renewal, Historic Preservation, Atlanta

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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May 2019

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to **Dr. Clifford Kuhn**. Thanks for being such a great historian, scholar, and advisor. I am forever grateful for your guidance. May you Rest in Perfect Peace. Additionally, **Dr. Katherine Hankins** – Thank you for your continued support and mentoring, in helping me realize my potential as a geographer.

Special dedication to: **Mrs. Sarah Fitten, Mr. Samuel H. Smith, Sr., Rev. Emory Searcy, Mr. William Huff**, and all those who called Buttermilk Bottom home. Thank you for your personal accounts and reflections that gave voice to a vibrant neighborhood with a deep sense of community, camaraderie, and pride. May your stories and memories resonate with all who encounter them.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The pending redevelopment of the Atlanta Civic Center area alongside increasing investment in the residential and commercial spaces of the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood invites reflection on the history of these places. Indeed, this urban district in Atlanta provides a rich legacy and foundation for understanding the city's growth and development over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st. In particular, I focus on the site of the present-day Atlanta Civic Center, which is northeast of the city's central business district. This location, once known as the neighborhood of Buttermilk Bottom, served as the site of a vibrant community for a significant number of African American residents. Through the process of urban renewal during the 1950s and 1960s, city officials declared the Buttermilk Bottom neighborhood a slum area and proceeded with the complete demolition of the area and the displacement of its residents. Built on the cleared land, the Civic Center complex served as a racial buffer between the black residents of Old Fourth Ward and the central business district. Many Black leaders and members of the Buttermilk Bottom community expressed disdain for the demolition of Buttermilk Bottom to make way for the Civic Center, reflecting Atlanta's constant racial tug-of-war and the ongoing resistance to urban renewal and redevelopment (Bayor, 1996).

In 2014, Mayor Kasim Reed declared tremendous interest in the Civic Center property, labeling the 19-acre site as the biggest prize the city had to sell (Saporta, 2014). Developers described the redevelopment of the site as a good opportunity to

add value and improve the surrounding neighborhoods of Old Fourth Ward and Midtown. Redevelopment of the Atlanta Civic Center site serves as an example of the type of projects prevalent in Atlanta's urban core since the late 1990s, such as Atlantic Station (e.g., Hankins and Powers, 2009) and Ponce City Market (Saporta, 2014), which includes an influx of urban infill and mixed-use developments that increase walkability and garner profits for large, private developers.

In November 2017, during the final weeks of his tenure as mayor, Reed announced that the sale of the Civic Center to Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) for \$31 million. This announcement followed years of speculation and debate as to the future of the site (Trubey, 2017). AHA released information on a \$300 million redevelopment plan to transform the former Civic Center property into a mixed use, mixed-income development. In examining the plans, AHA's CEO Catherine Buell explained the various functions of the new development to include housing units with 30 percent designated as affordable, along with retail, office space, a grocery store, and green space. Reed proclaimed the sale and subsequent redevelopment plans to be representative of the largest commitment to affordable housing in the city in over a decade (Trubey, 2017).

City officials and developers generally support the many projects that could potentially ignite more downtown revitalization, often disregarding the histories, stories, and significance of place and memory of those particular spaces (Inwood 2011, Hyra 2012). This support can contribute to issues and problems associated with gentrification and development, which is typically unresponsive to the needs of existing, and particularly long-time residents. Recent discussions on the future of the Atlanta Civic Center site add to a decades-long saga of redevelopment, which is rooted in the city's

racial politics. This neighborhood fell victim to the divisiveness of such politics and policies, and the prevailing attitudes of redevelopment and revitalization overshadowed and ultimately replaced the stories of the many people who once called this place home. In this research, I trace the discourses about Buttermilk Bottom from the mid-twentieth century to the present, demonstrating the ways in which Buttermilk Bottom was constructed as a place of community for neighborhood residents, as a “slum” in need of revitalization by city planners and developers, and as a prized piece of real estate to be exploited for economic gain. These competing discourses, which were often highly racialized, reveal the complicated annihilation of memory and meaning over time.

1.2 Significance of Research

In this thesis, I use the oral histories of residents of Buttermilk Bottom as one set of discourses that reflect community and meaning and a celebration of place. These oral histories contrast with much of the dominant narrative of the neighborhood during the urban renewal period, which depicted life in the neighborhood at the bottom of society. The residents recall a vibrant neighborhood with a deep sense of community, camaraderie, and pride. Their stories prompt readers to reevaluate other notions and misconceptions about Buttermilk Bottom and urban renewal in general. This research can provide a lens to view and frame—and challenge—contemporary discussions about redevelopment and preservation for intown Atlanta’s valued commercial and residential real estate.

For solid theoretical footing, I explore the power of place, as explained by Hayden (1995) as a connection of people’s lives and livelihoods to urban landscapes

and spaces as they change over time. I also draw from Cresswell's (2004) definition of place as: (1) being both simple and complicated, (2) suggesting some kind of connection between a person and a particular location, and (3) being central to both geography and everyday life. Additionally, I draw from Hankins et al.'s (2012) argument of race as an unstated but deeply important social relation that shapes the process by which a particular space is remade. As such, one better understands the ways in which racial discourses materialize in the remaking of the built environment and associated social geographies (Hankins et al. 2012). To give historical context, I explore racialized politics, policies, and practices that contributed to past development and that continue to inform redevelopment, which ultimately fail to take into account the significance of historical narratives. Buttermilk Bottom in Atlanta provides an example of how the neglect of historical dynamics in contemporary redevelopment discourses silences former residents' memories and creates conditions for the neighborhood to be abstracted as a space for economic gain and prepared for (re)development.

Broadly, my research explores connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place. I examine the stories of Buttermilk Bottom from former residents' perspectives and the discourses associated with urban renewal, along with the contemporary redevelopment discourses associated with the Atlanta Civic Center site, asking: What discourses shaped the periods of urban renewal and urban redevelopment in Atlanta? In what ways were these discourses racialized?

In what follows, I address my research questions by examining the oral histories of my research participants, who were former residents of Buttermilk Bottom. In

addition, I examine the planning documents and archival records of the urban renewal activities that sought to remake the neighborhood. I bring this analysis to bear on the contemporary period, as the City of Atlanta seeks to redevelop the site. Before I examine these competing discourses of the neighborhood, I first situate my positionality as a researcher, highlight relevant literature that informs this research, and then offer a more detailed description of the neighborhood from the mid-twentieth century to the present.

1.3 Positionality

At the onset, it is necessary for me to present my vantage point and position with respect to the history and significance of Buttermilk Bottom. As an African American historian and geographer, often times the desire to rewrite the history of place and space in a more positive light is overwhelming. The need to control the story and tell it through the voices of the marginalized and disfranchised provides meaningful inspiration and responsibility for people who have historically fallen in these categories. As such, I do not write this thesis to promote myself as an official authority positioned to rewrite, control, and answer all questions pertaining to topics of race, place, and development. Rather, I recognize that the connections between my social background and the people of Buttermilk Bottom may have also shaped my research approach.

This thesis grew out of my larger dissertation project rooted in my profound interest in United States cities and geography, interstate highways, and my desire to explore historic African American communities and enclaves across the country. As an avid traveler and historical tourist, I encountered in virtually every major American city I

visited the same phenomenon: the historic African American core is always traversed by major freeways and interstate highways. In New Orleans, Miami, Dallas, Detroit, Charlotte, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, I witnessed highways and freeways disrupting these historic spaces. With such stark similarities, immediately questions that would eventually become the basis of my dissertation came to mind. How did these changes in the historic spaces happen and from what authority? What role did African American leaders play in the development? How was the destruction of African American spaces justified? Further research on this topic revealed the greater connections to federal, state, and local postwar policies; however, ample scholarship has not been dedicated to exploring and excavating the voices and positions of African Americans who occupied those spaces (Williams 2015).

Additionally, my fellowship with the Planning Atlanta Collection provided the opportunity to immerse myself in the research of historically black neighborhoods in Atlanta, particularly Buttermilk Bottom and people who lived there.¹ I was welcomed with open arms into the homes, churches, and private spaces of people willing to divulge their rich memories into the oral history collections. All four of my research

¹ My involvement with the Planning Atlanta Collection afforded the opportunity to better acquaint myself with Buttermilk Bottom and the stories of the people who lived there. The Planning Atlanta Collection is a digital collection of materials related to city planning and urban development in Atlanta. The collection consists of city planning maps, city planning publications, demographic data, photographs depicting planning activities, oral histories, and aerial photographs. The City of Atlanta, Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, created much of the Planning Atlanta materials.

participants recognized me as young, black, smart, and capable of “doing right” with the history of their sacred Buttermilk Bottom neighborhood. During the oral history interviews, we fostered relationships and created our own black counterpublics – comfortable and safe spaces exclusively in the presence of other black people (Inwood 2011, Harris-Lacewell 2004). I know that my positionality and social background allowed me access to stories and memories that the interviewees might otherwise never have shared for academic or historical purposes (Tillman 2002). In this case, my positionality allows me to engage my own social background and perspective while analyzing the stories and memories from the oral histories, the historical and recent newspaper accounts, and the various discourses presented in this research. Throughout these sources of data, the interlocking relationship between race and place is evident.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Race and Place

Race is a topic of common discussion in the study of place and geography (Price 2010; Hankins et al. 2012; Peake and Shein 2000; Holloway 2000; Delaney 2002; Hoelscher 2003; Housel 2009; Ruddick 1996; Inwood 2010; Bonds and Inwood 2016). Human geographers engaged in the study of race and ethnicity have contributed greatly to the understanding that racialized processes are always and thoroughly spatialized (Price 2010). Drawing from Omi and Winant (1994), Hankins et al. (2012) note that it is commonly accepted among social scientist that 'race' is best understood as a social construction. While matters of race have always been central to the practice of geographical scholarship, the continued engagement with racialized geographies links geographic research with other issues in social science literatures (Peake and Shein 2000). Omi and Winant (1994) define racialization as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. For the purposes of this study, I explore how the racialization of place has been studied, and examine the relevance of the question of race in the study of geography.

In contextualizing race and place, I draw from Wilson's (2002) argument that race must not only be situated in a historical context, but also in a historical-geographical context. He contends that social practices are not only historically specific, but geographically or place-specific; and as such, a critical analysis of racialization and race-connected practices – practices resulting from racism, or negative attitudes groups of people or individuals belonging to one race hold about individuals or groups belonging to a different race – can show connections across geographical scales.

Wilson incorporates black identity politics in a Marxian framework and explains how race-connected practices can produce and reproduce themselves over time and space.

In recognizing connections between racial identity and place, Inwood (2011) explores the racialization of place from the perspective of those who live, work, and organize along Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, which was one of the most significant African-American commercial districts in the country in the early twentieth century. He focuses on the role that persons of color play in making racialized space by examining an urban redevelopment project undertaken by Big Bethel AME Church, one of Atlanta's oldest African American institutions. He argues that the project is symbolic in that it is representative of a contemporary black counterpublic space. Historically, black counterpublic spaces described that places where African Americans could gather to develop tactics for combating and overcoming racial barriers, debate the meaning of black identities, and engage in political debate (Dawson 2001, Harris-Lacewell 2004). Inwood (2011) discovered that one of the central goals of Big Bethel's redevelopment rested in the desire to promote a positive image of African American identity beyond the city of Atlanta.

In comprehending the relationship and relevance of geography to the question of race, Delaney (2002) contends that geographers' engagement with race has enriched our general understanding of how space works to condition the operation of power and the constitution of relational identities. He adds that this engagement helps to highlight the critical importance of racialized space to other aspects of American life. He states that the field of geography is well suited to engage projects of race and racialized space, as geography has strong methodological and theoretical approaches, along with

many voices to address a variety of audiences. Delaney (2002) draws from Toni Morrison's suggestion of a "wholly racialized world" dominated by the construction of whiteness, and builds his discussion to highlight the expansiveness and practical aspects of racialized geographies in guiding ideologies of racial formation, shaping space, and giving meaning to place.

Hankins et al. (2012) expands the discussion of race and place through an analysis of the Buckhead community in Atlanta. Known for its old-fashioned Southern charm, elegant homes, and prime shopping and nightlife district, Buckhead reigns as Atlanta's premier enclave of luxury and wealth. Hankins et al. pay specific attention to the Buckhead area known as the East Village. This six-block space contained the notorious nightclub scene to which Buckhead elite found problematic. As African Americans dominated the nightclub scene, Buckhead elites mobilized in objection to what they considered a growing problem. Hankins et al. use the mobilization efforts of whites in Buckhead and the role of race in shifting public opinions to demonstrate ways in which the spaces of the nightclub scene were racialized. They argued that race was unstated in the mobilization efforts, however it was critical in shaping the process that ultimately remade the space. They further argue that perceptions of Buckhead's nightlife as a space of Blackness further contributed the demise of the East Village, and remaking of the built environment to enhance white privilege.

Understanding race and place and their interdependence is essential for any critical geographical study of the American South. Geographic scholarship of the American South represents an innovative approach in the development of the intellectual capacity to understanding race, racism, and racial inequality (Inwood

2011b). Being cognizant of the ways in which race is engaged, and understood, also reflects the ways in which space is negotiated and governed (Hoelscher 2003). In a wholly racialized world, where there is no outside to racial geography, it is valuable to study racial formation in the production of space and the ways in which place is given meaning. Furthermore, in geographic research, it is important to understand that space is central to the construction of race and that race is central to the unfolding of spatialities (Delaney 2002).

2.2 Race and Politics

I venture to gain some understanding of race and politics through urban theory and geographers' examinations of Lefebvre's (1968) notion of the right to the city (Purcell 2002, Dikec 2001, Marcuse 2009). Purcell (2002) explores what the right to the city means and notes that although the right to the city provides an optimistic outlook for approaching social and political movements, greater definition to the notion of the right to the city would likely serve the application of the right to the city in social and political movements. Marcuse (2009) argues that the use of urban theory can help shape and inform action for the right to the city. He integrated his argument with cases of social issues to illustrate what the right to the city is, to whom it applies to, and how the right to the city looks in action.

To uncover the meaning of the right to the city, Purcell (2002) further investigates Lefebvre's perspective of the right to the city in the context of the inhabitant. He contends that because the right to the city revolves around the production of urban space, those who live in the city and contribute to the body of urban lived experience

and lived space can legitimately claim the right to the city. He adds that the right to the city empowers urban inhabitants with the right to participation that can expand the decision-making reach to all decisions that produce urban space. The right to participation insists that inhabitants participate directly in all decision-making. Purcell theorizes that Lefebvre suggests that those who are empowered through urban politics and political practice will determine the specific social and spatial outcomes the right to the city will have. Furthermore, Dikec (2001) asserts that the right to the city is not simply a participatory right, it is also an enabling right that is defined and refined through political struggle.

Dikec (2001) also analyzes the connection between spatialization and social injustice. The right to the city emerges as an approach for social justice in the production of urban space. Dikec (2001) finds the city a viable platform to explore political struggles, spatial relations, and social justice because the city has a history that provides a rich makeup of spatial dynamics. In his analysis, Dikec uses Lefebvre's argument for the right to the city as a gauge for how the right to the city may apply to social justice. Lefebvre's argument for the right to the city hinges on ideas of inclusion and the right to difference. Particularly, Lefebvre argues that spatial structuring in cities consummate exclusion - of marginalized individuals – from participation in politics and production of urban space. Yet, marginalized individuals have a right to be included in the production of the space that they live in -- a right to the city. The right to difference is a similar argument of equality that suggests that individuals have a right to be different and receive equality and participation in production of urban space. Dikec's attempts to

establish the basis for how right to the city can be used to mobilize a movement surrounding an appeal for social justice in the production of urban space.

In engaging questions of urban politics, Hankins (2015) uses the urban regime as explained by Stone (1989) to introduce a tool of conceptual innovation to assist geographers in better understanding the contemporary urban political landscape. I explore the regime politics because of its significance in the historical narrative of Atlanta. Hankins introduces the term political sociospatial dialectic, an extension of Soja's (1980) sociospatial dialectic, which describes the ways in which the spatial form is not only shaped by, but also shapes the social processes of the city. She contends that spatialized processes also shape political life in the city. Using the seminal research of Stone (1989) as an outline, Hankins discusses the urban political landscape of Atlanta. She details political agendas that shaped land-use policies, and explains how the urban regime utilized federal urban renewal initiatives to maintain orderliness and manage their interests in the downtown area. Hankins cites the displacement of thousands of African Americans from the Buttermilk Bottom neighborhood in favor of demolition and redevelopment into the city's civic center, as an example of a new social landscape created through the powers of the urban regime. She further explains that the urban renewal efforts intended to push African Americans away from downtown, and intentionally weakened the breadth of their political power. Ultimately, Hankins hails the regime analysis as an important lens through which to understand urban politics in the discipline of geography and beyond; regime politics can be valuable in understanding and exploring connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place.

2.3 Race, Urban Renewal, and Redevelopment

For a more in-depth understanding of connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place, I engage a broader spectrum of urban theory to complement the geographic literatures. I begin with Soja (1980), who provides a less contemporary, yet important discussion that incorporates various components of urban theory. Soja's concept of socio-spatial dialectic explains space as a social product and an integral component of understanding the intricacies and diversity of urban studies and urban theory. He contends that the organization, use, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience; and that socially produced space is a created structure comparable to other social constructions resulting from the transformation of given conditions of human society and action. Hankins et al. (2012) uses this concept as a basis for understanding the way in which race and space are mutually constitutive. Hoelscher (2003) calls the dialectic that unites race and place through mutual construction a powerful dynamic, thus useful in explaining the interdependence of race and place.

For conceptualizing the significance of the urban renewal period and the ways in which it was racialized, I draw from Hyra (2012) who investigates urban renewal, placing it in periods of old and new. He explains old urban renewal as typically referring to a period between 1949 and 1974 when there was a widespread national effort to remove blighted properties and poverty from areas surrounding central business districts, associated with substantial federal funding. He contends that policy makers

believed the removal of blighted properties and redevelopment of areas declared as slums would assist the cities in becoming more economically viable. Hyra argues that though removal of blighted properties had occurred before 1949, elements of old urban renewal, including its scope, the disproportionate negative impact on African Americans, and its association with the concentration of urban poverty, distinguish it from previous efforts of city building and revitalization. Old urban renewal was a downtown preservation and minority (read: black) containment strategy. In Atlanta, as elsewhere in the nation, Holliman (2009) explains that city leaders and boosters sought to use urban renewal to expand the central business district by displacing African Americans. She contends that local control of federal urban renewal programs perpetuated and sometimes exacerbated racial inequalities. Likewise, the story of Buttermilk Bottom highlights the inequalities, racial prejudices, and racialization of urban renewal, and illuminates a better understanding of the connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place.

Hyra (2012) explains the new urban renewal period between 1992 and 2007 as one that rivals the old period in many ways. With many of the same features of the past, new revitalization efforts spring from downtown growth and expansion strategies linked to the (re)migration of diverse populations into the urban core. My research on the redevelopment of the Civic Center complex, which is analogous to numerous redevelopment projects in the urban core of cities across the nation, supports extending the dates of the new urban renewal period to the present (2019). In the new urban renewal period that Hyra identifies, billions in federal funds have facilitated inner city revitalization and sought to remove blight and concentrated poverty by razing distressed

public housing, attracting middle-class residents to new, mixed-income developments, and incentivizing the movement of private business capital back to the central business district (Hyra 2012, Goetz 2011). Significant in the new urban renewal period is the demolition and redevelopment of areas of public housing, given that public housing was a cornerstone of the old urban renewal (e.g., Hankins et al 2015).

Hyra (2012) contends that the racial implications of the new urban renewal are more nuanced and complex than that of the prior period. In the old and new urban renewal, race mattered; however, new urban renewal offers both benefits and negative consequences to all, that are better understood through examinations of the intersection of race and class. Negative consequences are directly connected to the razing of public housing, which was occupied primarily by African Americans, accounting for 80% of persons displaced. Hyra further explains that benefits came in the form of redevelopment efforts in iconic, historically-black neighborhoods. During the new urban renewal period, these communities bounced back from poverty, crime, and deterioration, and began to develop economically. They became recognized for their heritage and historic past, symbolizing cultural as well as economic progress for African Americans. Ultimately, Hyra (2012) reiterates that the new urban renewal was beneficial to a large segment of African Americans because it is associated with the redevelopment of historic black communities, such as Harlem in New York City and the Shaw and U Street Corridor in Washington, D.C. Questions remain, however, about the degree to which these new developments further marginalize lower-income African Americans, who are unable to afford the increasing rents associated with revitalized urban districts.

This research examines the divisiveness of urban renewal in Buttermilk Bottom, and the racialized discourses that were utilized to redevelop the area. The redevelopment process included the complete demolition of a historic African American neighborhood for the construction of a Civic Center complex, and the displacement of the majority of its residents. So in contrast to Hyra's (2012) reiteration of new urban renewal being beneficial to African Americans because of redevelopment in historic black neighborhoods, I argue that in the case of Buttermilk Bottom, the benefits were never even possible. Instead, because Buttermilk Bottom was razed as a result of old urban renewal, redevelopment of the site currently occupied by the Civic Center complex during the new phase only adds to the eventual silencing of this historic black neighborhood, leaving only memories of a historic place.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Question

Broadly, my research explores connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place. I examine the ways in which one urban neighborhood is portrayed and understood through oral histories of residents and through an examination of planning documents in the old urban renewal period and that of the new urban renewal period, asking: What discourses shaped the periods of urban renewal and urban redevelopment in Atlanta? In what ways were these discourses racialized?

3.2 Case Study: Historic Buttermilk Bottom

The space the Atlanta Civic Center now occupies was once a thriving Black neighborhood known as Buttermilk Bottom. Located northeast of the Central Business District, the neighborhood's boundaries included Piedmont Avenue, Pine Avenue, Bedford Place, and Forrest Drive (now Ralph McGill). A low-income, mostly rental neighborhood of shotgun and modest wood-frame houses, Buttermilk Bottom lay in a valley between two parallel ridges. Stretching along the ridge to the west was Peachtree Street, and on the ridge to the east was Boulevard Avenue. In the early part of the twentieth century, wealthy whites lived in the homes along these streets (Keating 2001). Most of the original residents of the valley were Black domestic workers who had jobs in these homes on Peachtree and Boulevard. A major fire in 1917 burned down the homes along Boulevard Avenue, and the homes along Peachtree were replaced with offices and commercial development in the ensuing decades, but the more than 3,000 homes in the valley remained (Keating 2001). The four oral histories, described below, reflect experiences of residents who lived in this neighborhood in the 1940s and 1950s.

In the larger historical context, Buttermilk Bottom provides an illustration of community development among African Americans in Atlanta in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries. This community reached its zenith and ultimately its demise during the post-WWII planning period and urban renewal phases, simultaneously amidst the struggles for civil rights and social equality throughout the country. To better understand, one must comprehend the implications of complex processes that racialize place, in particular, segregation in American society (Inwood

2009). Segregated communities created throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century contributed to many of the planning and development issues that arose in the postwar period and urban renewal phases, especially pertaining to black population growth, expansion, mobility, and economic and political development (Kruse 2005; Bayor 1996).

Buttermilk Bottom was located on the northern fringes of the Auburn Avenue district, an area referred to as “Black Bottom.” Approximately 20,000 Blacks inhabited this area, and it served as the nerve center of Black life – social, religious, business, and political (ADW 1952). Inwood (2011) argues that the Auburn Avenue district was the heart of the black counterpublic in Atlanta and arguably the most important counterpublic space in the United States. Gregory (1994) identifies counterpublic sites as alternative spheres of public engagement, where marginalized groups develop interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. Black counterpublics developed as a result of segregation and their exclusion from the public sphere (Dawson 2001, Harris-Lacewell 2004).

An area characterized by extremes, contrasts, contradictions, and paradoxes, the Auburn Avenue district housed the bulk of poverty and the bulk of wealth among the city’s Black population, ranking as the wealthiest African American community in the United States (ADW 1952; Inwood 2011). It was home to the most significant African American civic and cultural institutions, the most important African American-owned financial institutions, the major African American political organizations that advanced civil rights; the offices for black doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals; and the premier stages for black entertainers in the segregated South. It also housed

the *Atlanta Daily World*, one of the only black daily newspapers in the country (Inwood 2011). Meanwhile, according to the city's planning commission, the Auburn Avenue district and surrounding area contained one of Atlanta's worst slums, making it a definite menace to the future health of the downtown area. Consequently, the commission proposed demolition, in favor of a civic center and permanent park (*ADW* 1952).

The commission believed that the "Black Bottom" and surrounding areas could be converted into areas of more usefulness and would open up the heart of Atlanta, making possible the construction of new downtown housing and hotels in the adjacent sections. The commission's report explained:

"It (Black/Buttermilk Bottom) could be converted into a large civic center to contain an art museum, library, large convention auditorium, recreational facilities and downtown park areas. The buildings could be located along the ridge slopes with park areas and possibly a small lake in the bottom."
(*ADW* 1952)

The commission suggested that this type of development could ultimately wipe out slums areas and create permanent civic improvements that would appear both economically sound and more psychologically attractive (*ADW* 1952). The renewal of this area would mark the continued engagement and battle against the ring of poverty and blight encircling downtown Atlanta (Holliman 2009). The possibility of receiving federal redevelopment support for slum clearance motivated the commission to continue exploring such proposals (*ADW* 1952).

Buttermilk Bottom & Urban Renewal

Buttermilk Bottom's urban renewal story mirrors that of other Black communities and enclaves in cities across the country (Hanchett 1998, Brundage 2005). Brundage

(2005) argues that Blacks in the South, unlike whites, could not control how market forces and government policy reshaped their communities. Instead, they watched with mounting alarm as whites unleashed the forces of urban renewal in black neighborhoods. White power manifested in urban renewal and threatened to radically degrade the traditionally black spaces that had sustained black community life (Brundage 2005). Furthermore, urban renewal demonstrated white determination to extend control over urban spaces that whites previously had ceded to black control. Blinded by both superiority and insensitivity, many whites ignored the value and wholeness of black community life in targeted areas; instead, they saw only degraded environments that impeded their ambitions for their cities (Brundage 2005, Holliman 2009). Whites took for granted that they had both the right and the wisdom to dictate how public space, whether traditionally used by whites or others, should be arranged and used. This persistent inequality of power exiled Blacks and fueled the demand for Black representation in planning processes (Inwood 2011, Brundage 2005, Stone 1989, *ADW* 1952).

Federal advances and available funding in the postwar period led to great alterations of the built environment in cities across the country (Inwood 2011). During this period, city planners and leaders realized the serious problems existing in urban areas and became focused on long overdue improvements. Economic depression along with the war efforts had halted construction and prevented needed repairs on the infrastructure of many American cities. As a result, physical decay and acres of slum and blight were visible in cities across the nation (Teaford 2006). In the rapidly growing metropolis of Atlanta, as in other cities, urban renewal was complicated by race,

disinvestment trends in black communities, factors such as redlining, and the system of American segregation (Jackson 1985, Bayor 1996, Holliman 2009, Inwood 2011), which dominated planning and decision-making. With public policy decisions in the hands of white leaders in favor of economic progress, the renewal of the city's urban core reflected large-scale projects that enhanced business and commercial activities and simultaneously displaced mostly the poor black population. Investigating urban renewal in Atlanta reveals the intent of white leaders to maintain traditions of segregation and restrict mobility among blacks (Bayor 1996, Holliman 2009, Inwood 2011).

From the early 1950s, into the early 60s, city officials debated urban renewal in the Auburn Avenue district or "Black Bottom" area (*ADW* 1952, *Atlanta Constitution* 1955). By 1963, city officials had decided that Buttermilk Bottom on the northern edge was ripe for urban renewal, and renewed its application for urban renewal funding. In years leading up to the application, there had been increasing competition among cities for urban renewal money, and by the time Atlanta renewed its application, the federal Urban Renewal Administration had become more stringent in enforcing its regulations. One of the requirements that the administration threatened to enforce more strictly was that housing be built to replace housing that was being torn down (Keating 2001). To ensure federal support, and the support of the Black community, city leaders proposed the development of new public housing to accommodate displacement from Buttermilk Bottom on renewal land west of downtown. City leaders sought to limit Black public housing and the number of displaced persons remaining in the area of the Civic Center complex, creating controversy that lasted throughout the redevelopment phase and beyond (Bayor, 1996).

Yet, it was not the deplorable living conditions in the area that commanded attention; it was the proximity of the neighborhood to the central business district (Holliman 2009). Using the mechanisms of urban renewal, Buttermilk Bottom was cleared for a new Civic Center complex, which contained an auditorium and exhibit hall (Bayor 1996, Stone 1989, Kruse 2005, Keating 2001, Holliman 2009). City and business leaders who had kept a close eye on Buttermilk Bottom had finally fulfilled their plans. Business and political leaders supported the redevelopment of Buttermilk Bottom because of its proximity and walking distance to downtown hotels and commercial district (Holliman 2009). Likewise, many of the white leaders believed that the civic center in Buttermilk Bottom would serve as a buffer between downtown and the Black residents of the adjacent deteriorated neighborhoods yet to be renewed (ADW 1952, Bayor 1996, Stone 1989, Kruse 2005, Keating 2001, Holliman 2009).

City leaders, operating under the guise of urban renewal, used federal regulations as a convenient way to dispose of blighted spaces, most often in areas occupied by large numbers of Black residents (Stone 1989, Bayor 1996, Hanchett 1998, Keating 2001). Informal agreements and racial prejudices among city leaders undermined the real purposes of urban renewal, to such extent that much of the planning occurred in secret (Keating 2001). White city leaders cautiously expedited requests to the Urban Renewal Administration for acquiring the land for the Civic Center/auditorium complex with no mention of developing the larger area. City leaders wanted to avoid admitting to residents of Buttermilk Bottom that their neighborhood would soon face its demise (Stone 1989, Keating 2001).

The story of Buttermilk Bottom is one that is quickly fading away as those with primary accounts and memories are dying out. Moreover, very little has been written about Buttermilk Bottom and the people who lived in the neighborhood, with the exception of brief mentions in the broader histories of Atlanta in the postwar period (see Stone 1989, Bayor 1996, Keating 2001, Kruse 2005). More in-depth research turns up the occasional newspaper article or blog post about memories of residents growing in the neighborhood. In culture and arts, Buttermilk Bottom has been venerated through song and the contemporary visual art of James Malone, a native son. Community projects and other grassroots efforts have produced documentaries and collections of memories, yet no widespread attention or mainstream appeal has accompanied those projects (Smith 2011). Further research of 'Buttermilk Bottom Atlanta' returns the often seen images of poverty and a slum environment, which has come to be associated with Buttermilk Bottom. The popular image of Mayor William B. Hartsfield inspecting the neighborhood often stands out as it was featured in LIFE Magazine on the eve of demolition in 1959. (see Figure 2).

And so, Buttermilk Bottom met its demise and became of the site of the Atlanta Civic Center, with no remaining physical vestiges of the neighborhood that existed before. Memories replaced the physical, social, and cultural landscape that existed in that place for almost a century. The *Atlanta Daily World* in December 1959 captured community sentiments in an opinions piece entitled "The People Must Wake Up." It served as a rousing call to action for the Buttermilk Bottom community in the wake of various urban renewal projects. The article called the time period a "sad picture in the municipal lives of Blacks in the Auburn Avenue district and Atlanta's fourth ward." It

added that unfortunately, the racial issue acted as the motive behind zoning issues and planning and it should not be allowed to influence urban renewal one way or the other. The article concluded: “The entire black community had better wake up. If the present trend of forcing displaced person out of the eastern portion of the city continues, the churches and business in the Auburn Avenue district will die on the vine. And if this happens, the economy of our racial group in the city in general will be undermined” (ADW 1959). In this account, Buttermilk Bottom is portrayed as a key residential space of Auburn Avenue’s key institutional patrons.

Civic Center Redevelopment

More recently, the Civic Center complex entered conversations yet again as Mayor Reed declared it “the biggest prize the city had to sell” (Saporta 2014). By 2015, renderings had been released, and permits issued for redevelopment. Earlier proposals for redevelopment suggested the rebranding and refabricating the complex in the form of a Hollywood-style studio. City officials believed a full-service production facility could be the catalyst for neighborhood revitalization (Pendered 2012). Duriya Farooqui, Atlanta’s chief operating officer, stated that the proposal to retrofit the facility for the film industry, along with the right business strategy, would position the Civic Center to strengthen Atlanta’s position in the global entertainment marketplace (Pendered 2012).

Another proposal also crystalized the Hollywood appeal, suggesting redevelopment that would help build upon Atlanta’s and Georgia’s growing reputation as a center for television and movie production. Developers believed live studio audiences and TV studios overlooking public plazas could create a tourist destination, so the

proximity of the Civic Center complex to the downtown hotels was seen as an asset. Street-level retail along Piedmont Avenue, residential towers on the northern part of the property, an office building, television studios, a hotel, and underground parking sealed this plan (Saporta 2014). Even before that, in 2004, the Atlanta Development authority proposed redevelopment that would create a mixed-use development at the Civic Center complex with high-rise residences and street-level retail to revitalize a “no-man’s land” on Piedmont Avenue between Midtown and the central business district. This project would connect with the construction of a pending parkway (now Ivan Allen Boulevard), the Georgia Aquarium, and the planned World of Coca-Cola Museum (Pendered 2004).

Negotiations and discussions on redevelopment plans lingered for over a decade, finding a brief moment of relief when Mayor Reed announced the sale of the Civic Center property to Weingarten Realty, a Texas-Based company, at a price of \$30 million. Weingarten’s proposal consisted of an ambitious mix of apartments, office space, green space and retail totaling approximately \$300 million. Shortly thereafter in October 2016, Reed ultimately severed the negotiations, citing complications and a lack of acceptable terms of agreement (Stafford, 2016). After resuming discussions in August 2017, Reed announced the sale of the property to the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) in November. The completed sale marked a new chapter in the history of this site and space (Trubey 2017).

In April 2018, AHA hosted a public meeting at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, located in close proximity to the Civic Center site. AHA representatives and other project team members presented an overview of their plans for the mixed-income

redevelopment of the Civic Center site. Community members, including board members and residents of the Fourth Ward West neighborhood association, participated in a planning forum to prioritize neighborhood goals and preferences for the property, which is encompassed within the Old Fourth Ward (Sutherland, 2018). Yet, noticeably absent from recent planning and discussions of the redevelopment surrounding the Civic Center site are the voices of residents of historic Buttermilk Bottom. Their stories have been relegated to a mythological past, existing only in the memories of those who called that place their community.

3.3 Methods and Data

This study is a qualitative research project that examines connections between race, place, and redevelopment, and the meaning of place in Buttermilk Bottom. Utilizing a multi-methods approach, I began with the collection of oral histories through the Planning Atlanta Project. Over the course of a two-year fellowship, I thoroughly researched Buttermilk Bottom, searching for people who could participate in the oral history project. As Buttermilk Bottom's demolition occurred almost 50 years earlier and caused widespread displacement and dispersal throughout the region, I knew that locating persons of interest could provide a challenge. I also realized that my own positionality, previous knowledge, and social background, could be of use in conducting the fieldwork for this project (England 1994). I understood the historical significance and central role of the church in the African American community; I knew that it could serve as the springboard for researching Buttermilk Bottom.

Contact with the churches that served the people of Buttermilk Bottom and the surrounding neighborhoods provided me with information needed to locate people for the oral history interviews. I conducted four detailed interviews seeking to capture stories of the neighborhood in different time frames from four distinctive vantage points. The interviews were recorded using advanced digital recording devices, transcribed, and made publicly available through the Planning Atlanta Collection. The interviews were conducted as informal, semi-structured conversations, intended to make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible. Questions were open-ended and flexible, often springing off in many different directions, but always expansive with new knowledge and information. Three of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewees and one in the church office. The conversation format and the rapport established throughout this process created a comfortable space that yielded high-quality interviews that further enrich the discussion of Buttermilk Bottom.

Table 1: Interview Participants

| Name | Age +/- 5 years | Gender (Perceived) | Occupation |
|-------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| W. Huff | 85 | Male | Retired Army Officer |
| E. Searcy | 75 | Male | Pastor |
| S. Fitten | 70 | Female | Retired City Administrator |
| S. Smith | 65 | Male | Transit Authority Manager |

Additionally, I examined newspapers, journals, and archival materials featuring discussions and information on Buttermilk Bottom, urban renewal projects in Atlanta, and the redevelopment of the Atlanta Civic Center complex. For historical discussions and accounts, I relied on the *Atlanta Daily World*, as it was the daily African American

newspapers covering African American life in Atlanta. Since the *World* is digitized, searching for topics pertaining to my research, along with the sentiments and responses of the African American community on issues of all spectrums was much easier. Being the premier Black news medium, and often the only to cover such specific issues pertaining to Black life, the *World* is fairly subjective in its presentation of issues. This subjectivity does not disqualify the newspaper's credibility as a source; instead it helps to understand the more critical analysis of racial issues present in the discourses. The *World* also supports a tone of uplift, which I seek for this thesis focused on the stories and memories of Buttermilk Bottom.

To complement the use of the *World* as a source, I found other materials to be just as valuable. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC)* and the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* served as great points of reference as they provided accounts of city leaders, the business community, and developers spanning the mid to late 20th century, into the 21st. The *AJC* is by far Metro Atlanta's most widespread newspaper. Its coverage spans various spectrums, as its current iteration is the result of a merger of two newspapers representing opposite ends of the political outlook. Thus, the *AJC* offered a wider variety of well-rounded viewpoints to specific discourses.

The *Atlanta Business Chronicle* is a leading voice for the business community in the city and provided excellent coverage and outline of the redevelopment efforts of the Civic Center complex in recent years. It served as an important source of data because it featured interviews of business leaders and developers, along with the perspectives from city leaders, administrators, civic boosters, and citizens. Especially useful were the in-depth analyses of various proposals and plans for redevelopment, and discussions of

the impacts in which those plans would have on the neighborhoods and commerce in the area. As this thesis seeks to explore connections between historical significance, memories, and redevelopment, the data collected via the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* enriched the discourses in providing the vantage point of business interests.

Again, through a methodological framework of qualitative research methods including interviewing and analyzing the texts of newspapers and policy documents, I examine and analyze connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place in Buttermilk Bottom. DeLyser and Sui (2014) argue that in qualitative research, enduring methods like interviewing and discourse, when articulately engaged, may ensure methodological credibility and provide insight to research questions. Interviewing and discourse can unearth vital information, uncover strategies for empowerment, and assist researchers in untangling broader social issues (Dixon 2010, DeLyser and Sui 2014). Interviewing remains a vital and vibrant research method and can reveal far more than just words alone, thus grounding research in interviewing can keep geographic scholarship contemporary, diverse, and engaging (DeLyser and Sui 2014).

The depth of the four interviews conducted as part of Buttermilk Bottom segment of the Planning Atlanta Project resulted in a sizeable amount of useful data for this thesis project. The intentional design of the open-ended questions used in the interviews produced common themes and patterns that became a basis for examination and analysis. The interviews produced responses that became the central discourse and the foundation of the research question, which broadly explores connections between race, place, and redevelopment in Buttermilk Bottom. Data collected from the

newspapers, journals, archival materials, and other supplemental sources provided the themes and content that I analyzed.

4 EXAMINING THE DISCOURSE

In this section, I explore the competing discourses using archival and interview data. Following the historical development of the neighborhood, I first examine the discourses of the residents of Buttermilk Bottom and highlight the ways in which they represent the neighborhood as a place-based community. The oral histories revealed common themes that support a vibrant community, operating and functioning within the boundaries of the time period. Then I draw from archival documents to explore how the discourses of planners and city leaders largely vilify the space as a site of disease, poverty, and social disorder, racializing the lives of residents. They also advance a discourse of the potential of the space, abstracting the neighborhood to one of economic value. Due to the close proximity to the central business district, the neighborhood became an area of contention and a focal point for the city's urban renewal plans and revitalization efforts, ultimately resulting in construction of the Civic Center Complex. More contemporary discourses also follow this theme of economic value and, in an ironic twist, gesture towards the possibility of creating a mixed-use, mixed-income development with retail spaces, a park, and other amenities—with the potential to foster place-based community.

4.1 Buttermilk Bottom was our Community

"I grew up in Buttermilk Bottom, the portion of the city of Atlanta that's called the Old Fourth Ward. I attended elementary school at C.W. Hill Elementary School over there and lived at 260 Baker Street. And, now of course 260 Baker Street and where I lived where the house is no more. Because, urban renewal or whatever came through

and, of course, you could tell over there in that area, it was where families lived, where people actually lived. But now you have the Georgia Power building sitting on one corner and the Atlanta Civic Center sitting over there (Fitten 2014).” Sarah Fitten, a retired city administrator and former resident, provides an overview that begins with Buttermilk Bottom as her home and leads to the present state of the place. She further explained, “at the civic center, the name Buttermilk Bottom is on a plaque, on a little sign plaque there on the wall . . . that’s really the only evidence of the area over there.” For Mrs. Fitten, Buttermilk Bottom was a place of families and community.

When asked what it was like living in and around Buttermilk Bottom, Samuel Smith, Sr., a transit authority manager and former resident, described it simply as fun. “It was the only place I knew, truly. What it was like-- it was fun. I had some challenges with some of the guys who lived in the neighborhood; because they could do things better than I could. They were natural athletes. And we had a tremendous amount of people there to be talented in the sports arena, but it was fun. David T. Howard High School, C. W. Hill Elementary School had great educators. And, there were tremendous amount of resources available to us in the community (Smith 2015).” Mr. Smith describes a multi-faceted community of athletes, educators, and community leaders.

Mrs. Fitten responded similarly, saying, “growing up over there was a fun time. That was the best time in my life. I knew all my neighbors. I knew their parents. I knew I everybody I went to school with. If you didn’t go to school with them, you attended church with them. Sunday school and church . . . just involved in a lot of good things going on in the neighborhood. It was home for me and when people say, ‘do you still go over that way, Sarah?’ I say I most certainly do, every week to church and as often as I

can. And I like to tell people about where I grew up at and to be able to show them. Because I look at it like this, my mother taught me at an early age that if you don't know where you come from, you're not going know where you're going. And I certainly will not be accused of not knowing where I came from (Fitten 2014).” For Mrs. Fitten, the neighborhood was steeped in important relationships around key neighborhood institutions of the school and the church. It was, for Mrs. Fitten, a place-based community made up of generations of residents.

Recollections around the naming of Buttermilk Bottom reveal residents' place-based narratives. William Huff, a retired Army Officer and former resident, explained, “One of the reasons why they called it Buttermilk Bottom was because we ate a lot of corn bread and drank a lot of buttermilk. They'd make the corn bread, and they pour buttermilk on it and eat it . . . and I believe that's where the name of Buttermilk Bottom came from (Huff 2014).” Mr. Smith expounded on another rendition:

Back in the old days, when people were traveling with horse and wagon, milk was delivered . . . bootleggers spooked this wagon being drawn by a horse and turned it over. And milk was there forever -- this buttermilk . . . that smell was there and you just couldn't get rid of it. They said it ran for several days, and they called it Buttermilk Bottom. Right down in the heartbeat of the bottom. (Smith 2015).

For both Mr. Huff and Mr. Smith, the stories about the neighborhood's name reflect a community heritage.

The oral history interviews with residents represented Buttermilk Bottom as an important place of community, which contradicted other competing accounts of the neighborhood as one of poverty and in need of renewal. In responding to Buttermilk Bottom being Atlanta's most notorious slum area, Mrs. Fitten explained:

I would say that's-that is not true. That's an absolute lie. And the reason I say that is I don't care where you live all of the streets are not going to look the same. Yeah we have some streets that had some gravels on them. But we had major streets that were not. And, ah, it wasn't run down. If it was run down it's just as run down as it is anywhere else with slum-landlords. But it wasn't that bad you know a lot of people owned they homes over there. And the ones that rented they homes I think that if anything looked bad it was because the landlords didn't keep them up . . . and they weren't owned by the people that were living there. They were owned by people of other colors. Uh huh. So when they was able to buy them sugar shacks for 'em they bought them and fixed them up as best they could. You wou---that area had a lot of working class people—those ooh, they, they worked. My mother worked. My stepfather worked. They worked. A lot of 'em worked two jobs. But they, they worked. And everybody knew everybody. Everybody loved on everybody ah sure you're going to have dissension in wherever you go. You gonna have that in your house the schoolhouse, the church house, the white house anywhere it's gonna be some kind of problem. But, no it wasn't as bad and as I've heard people say. No! And we weren't animals over there. We were decent, loving, nice people . . . people that loved on each other (Fitten 2014).

Mrs. Fitten was adamant in her defense of the place she called her community. She exuded the passion I encountered each time I interviewed the former residents. She further explained, “We had neighbors that looked out for you. They knew your mother worked or they knew your father worked. They knew who was supposed to be at your home and who wasn't. You wasn't supposed to be outside after you came home from school. You had chores to do. You had things to do (Fitten 2014).” For Mrs. Fitten, the neighborhood was an important place for neighborly relations and for personal and collective responsibility.

“We was poor and didn't even know it,” explained Mr. Huff (2014). However, that didn't diminish the spirit and quality of life in Buttermilk Bottom, it simply made it stronger. Mr. Smith explained, “We didn't have a whole lot, all we had was just mainly our self-respect and our dignity. We didn't have a lot of opportunities that others may have had. When you think about it now, the Caucasians had more opportunities than we

did. But we were just and we were equal. But, we only were held back because we didn't have the opportunities. So, once we were given the opportunity, we excel. And it was just . . . the time that we were living in that we were forced to live under the conditions that we were faced with (Smith 2015)." All the former residents spoke of the remarkable pride in which they and all their neighbors had for their community. "We were people that had a tremendous amount of respect for ourselves. And if you entered the property of Buttermilk Bottom, and you were not a resident of Buttermilk Bottom, you would stand out. We were very protective of where we lived (Smith 2015)." Mr. Huff and Mr. Smith describe the limited opportunities of racial segregation during the Jim Crow era and also celebrate the tight-knit community of Buttermilk Bottom as an important neighborly place.



Figure 1: Locating home on Historic Map (GSU Special Collections)

The pride expressed by residents of Buttermilk Bottom can be linked to the neighborhood's self-sufficiency and the strength of community institutions. The former residents spoke in high regards of the community's establishments that catered to everybody's needs. Mr. Huff recalled a grocery store with a butcher shop, where the people in the neighborhood would go to get items on credit, and would pay off their balances each payday. He also told the story of the Peanut Butter factory that children would visit in the evenings and received leftover peanuts to take home and eat (Huff 2014). Mr. Smith added, "there were businesses on Forrest Avenue. My mother had a business on Butler Street. She was a barber. And then there were grocery stores, a hardware store . . . a miscellaneous store that had just a lot of things that people used (Smith 2015)." Mrs. Fitten continued:

We had barbershops operating and owned by blacks, shoe shops, hair salons, a drug store on Forest Avenue that was Cooper Drug store. We had upholstery shops. We had restaurants, of course. We had everything we kind of really needed in our neighborhoods. We had black hotels. We had black cabstands. You name it we had it. We had churches. We had what we needed. We had our schools. Sure, we did and we would do a lot of things at school (Fitten 2014).

Based on the stories presented through the interviews, all the makings of a vibrant neighborhood-based community life were present in Buttermilk Bottom before the urban renewal period.

A common theme and key element for each former resident was the connection to a church in Buttermilk Bottom. Mr. Smith stated, "That was what kept us together -- the church, our faith." Not only did churches serve religious purposes, they also served as community centers and political forums. Emory Searcy, Jr., associate pastor at Mt. Zion Second Baptist Church - a historic church serving Buttermilk Bottom - and former resident, said the pastors of the churches in the area were the most powerful people in the community (Searcy 2014). Mrs. Fitten added, "back then, of course, you know you heard everything from the church. You heard everything from the Black church because everybody went to church (Fitten 2014)."

Mr. Huff attended the Church of God and Christ, a small church on Buchanan Street where Elder Henry Ingram pastored. Mrs. Fitten attended Butler Street Baptist Church and is still active in the same church. Both Mr. Smith and Mr. Searcy attended Mt. Zion Second Baptist Church and are both currently active members. Mr. Searcy's father served as the pastor of the congregation during his childhood and well into his adulthood (Huff 2014, Fitten 2014, Searcy 2014, Smith 2015).

As the church was the center of the vibrant community life in Buttermilk Bottom, news of urban renewal proliferated through the walls of the churches in the community. It was in the respective congregations that many received word of the community's demise. Mrs. Fitten explained:

They had different meetings, of course, you would hear it at church meetings or if a person rented the properties that they lived in, they would hear from the landlord. And you would get it in writing . . . I know we did, letting us know when it was going to come . . . how it was going to come. (They) showed maps of how it was going to look and what it was going to look like now. And of course it- it's looking that way minus the people, 'cause the neighborhood was full of people (Fitten 2014).

Mr. Smith recalled:

I remember the day when it was announced. I must have been around nine years old, and we were in church. And this person from the state came right after services, and Rev. Searcy mentioned, he told us to wait around. We had to wait because the state was coming to give us, to talk to us about moving. Had something very important to talk to us. And I was sittin' on the front row there, kinda on the side. And he said that, "Well, folks, you got to move now because the expressway is coming right through the center of your church. I got the diagrams here. And you gonna come through, the expressway's gonna come right through here." And I said to myself, Why do we have to move? Why can't the expressway just go around the church? Little did I know, I was only nine years old, what he was talking about was that the church would be sitting right in the middle of the freeway and the freeway would be four or five lanes on one side and four or five lanes on the other side (Smith 2015).

Being the son of one of the "powerful" pastors in Buttermilk Bottom, Mr. Searcy's recollection was a bit different, yet still church-based. He recalled:

We found out from a Jew, who ran a pharmacy on Forrest Avenue, that they (state) had a plan to move everybody, African Americans, from Forrest Avenue all the way to Ponce de Leon . . . Now did the Jewish pharmacy had--had um, reason for doing that. One is--it, it would affect his business. The churches rose up simply because it would affect their business because number one is that most of the people at that time walked to church from these various churches in Fourth Ward neighborhood and so that--you gonna move everybody out that changes drastically all of the people who lived in the community. So um, Wheat

Street, Ebenezer, Mount Zion, all of the pastors rose up and opposed that particular movement at that particular time. So actually it really--it, it prolonged the goal of the urban renewal process (Searcy 2014).

Mr. Searcy also spoke of an extensive presence of Jewish businesses and the respect they had for the black churches. He added, "The Jew store respected the Sabbath day, so it was closed on Sunday. So therefore you had to go and get your groceries on Friday and Saturday -- that was it, because it would be closed on Sunday. That was a respect -- out of respect to the Black churches (Searcy 2014)."

Eventually, the churches that had once been fixtures to the Buttermilk Bottom community were either relocated or in the case of the Church of God in Christ on Buchanan Street that Mr. Huff attended, obliterated. Mt. Zion Second Baptist Church, the oldest black Baptist congregation on the city's eastside, and the second oldest black Baptist church - hence the name – was originally located on the corner of Piedmont and Baker Streets at 281 Piedmont Avenue. Mr. Smith stated, "When you go there now, all you see is a bridge (Smith 2015)." The church relocated to its present site on Boulevard and continued to serve residents of the Old Fourth Ward. Mr. Searcy added:

Mount Zion made the commitment to stay in Fourth Ward, not move to any other area in the metropolitan area, but stay in Fourth Ward. And so, Butler Street was another church that stayed in the area, and so, we sort of rolled with the punches to the extent that we took a chance, because the people who are committed to the church don't necessarily change churches, you know. And so, so they don't do that too fast, so you have families that are involved . . . these are faithful members, you know, because they still come back. Their children still come back and their grandchildren still come back (Searcy 2014).

Butler Street Baptist Church, now located at 315 Ralph McGill Boulevard (Forrest Avenue), was located on a portion of Butler Street that was removed. Mrs. Fitten explained, "Down by Grady Hospital there's a Jesse Hill Drive now, that was Butler

Street . . . That street ran all the way to the Butler Street that our church was on, but when they start dealing with the expressway and the Urban Renewal, and all of this stuff, they cut out all of that . . . they chopped that down (Fitten 2014).”

In the aftermath of urban renewal and relocation, the former residents of Buttermilk Bottom still harbor great pride for their former community. Mrs. Fitten summed up the pride that resonated so eloquently, “It was a neighborhood where families respected and loved and worked and played together and went to church was involved . . . I am so proud to have grown up over there.” She continued, “It was nice . . . I don’t know who you talked to, but I wish that they would stop going out saying mean-spirited things about Buttermilk Bottom. But, if they want to lump me ‘cause I stayed on Butler Street and Ralph and Willoughby Way -- I’ll take it. I was a part of ‘the Bottom.’ Oh yeah! I was a part of ‘the Bottom’! (Fitten 2014).” Mr. Smith agreed that Buttermilk Bottom had equipped him for the world and helped instill character, integrity, self-respect, and those fundamentals of loving your neighbor as yourself (Smith 2015). Over half a century later, neighborhood pride and the feeling of home yet resonate in the stories of the former residents.

The stories captured through the Buttermilk Bottom oral history collections establish a narrative of a thriving neighborhood-based community that existed on the site of what became the Atlanta Civic Center. The framing of the area as one of a place-based community was disregarded in the period of urban renewal that ultimately destroyed the dense network of houses and families and neighborhood institutions.

4.2 Buttermilk Bottom as a space of poverty

In 1952, the Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC), a predecessor of the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), Atlanta's current regional planning agency, reported the Auburn Avenue district contained one of Atlanta's worst slums, referencing Buttermilk Bottom. As one commission report expressed "As it now stands, it is a definite menace to the future health of the downtown area (to say nothing of the health of its residents), (*ADW* 1952)." "It could be converted into a large civic center to contain an art museum, library, large convention auditorium, recreational facilities and downtown park areas." The commission believed that the often-referenced "Black Bottom" area could be converted into an area of more usefulness and would open up the heart of the city, making possible the construction of new downtown housing and hotels in the adjacent sections (*ADW* 1952, Williams 2015).

MPC's report represented a pivotal moment in the history of Buttermilk Bottom. It birthed the slum discourse, and the desire for renewal and redevelopment from those outside the community, which became the overarching narrative of the community moving forward. City and business leaders worked incessantly to maintain control of the growing metropolis to ensure that Atlanta became a great tourist center. Together, they set in motion plans for improvement that coupled with metropolitan planning and racial challenges, created a new wave of issues, many stemming from urban renewal. As a Black neighborhood labeled sub-standard and in most need of improvement, Buttermilk Bottom's fate rested in the hands of those with power who ultimately abstracted the space to one of potential economic and (white) civic value.

Urban renewal became a major tool by which slum clearance could be achieved, and city and business leaders took full advantage of the federal funds to redevelop and renew inner cities. Federal assistance hurried the causes of urban renewal, and the city was intent on capitalizing on these resources, which aided in the achievement of its enhanced business and commercial interests (Bureau of Planning, Williams 2015).

Atlanta's mayor William B. Hartsfield brought national attention to slum clearance and urban renewal in Atlanta when he was photographed inspecting what became known as one of Atlanta's most notorious slums, Buttermilk Bottom.



Figure 2: Hartsfield (right) in Buttermilk Bottom (LIFE, 1959)

Plans were already in motion for clearing Buttermilk Bottom, which ranked number one on the city's list for clearance. City officials awaited "just such a program" to accomplish the goal of clearing the areas for redevelopment (*Atlanta Constitution* 1955). In a *Constitution* article, one city official referred to Buttermilk Bottom as an eyesore of

tattered, ramshackled dwellings in need of clearing. The Planning Commission explained:

“As it now stands, it is a definite menace to the future health of the downtown area (to say nothing of the health of its residents) . . . It could be converted into a large civic center to contain an art museum, library, large convention auditorium, recreational facilities and downtown park areas.” (ADW 1952)

The community (Buttermilk Bottom) often faced the challenges of a substandard environment. The Fulton County Health Department made rounds in the area, giving typhoid shots to prevent possible outbreaks of diseases. Because of the neighborhood’s geographical location in the “low-lying bottom,” the area risked becoming inundated by stagnant pools of water, flies, and other health threats (*Atlanta Constitution*, 1955). The area was also more susceptible to flooding in the event of heavy rain. In an instance of torrential rainfall, some 200 or more persons required the assistance of the Red Cross after rainwater seeped through floors and poured through windows, washing away clothing, food, and in some cases, victims. These many issues provided city officials with additional justification—and an expanded discourse of the disease and poverty of the area—to speed up the clearing of Buttermilk Bottom (*Atlanta Constitution* 1955).

The 1960s brought more drastic changes in the city’s urban renewal policies and ultimately the demise of Buttermilk Bottom. Under the leadership of Mayor Ivan Allen, action surrounding the construction of a civic center intensified. In the fall of 1964, the city received approval from the federal government for the use of the Early Land Acquisition Procedure, which allowed a site to be secured redevelopment prior to official approval and execution of the urban renewal process. City leaders acted quickly, acquiring Buttermilk Bottom for the construction of the civic center. Mayor Allen

gathered the support of the business community, the Board of Aldermen, the media, and other major entities to move forward with the clearance and renewal plans in the area (Silver and Moeser 1995). Demolition began with the C.W. Hill Elementary School to provide space for the auditorium and exhibition hall as the first pillar of the civic center. The construction of the civic center not only achieved the objective of eradicating one of the city's most notorious slums through urban renewal, but it also served as a racial barrier between the central business district and black population on the city's eastside, contributing to whirlwind of political and social issues plaguing Atlanta and the rest of the country during the turbulent 1960s (Bayer 1996).

Ultimately, the discourses of poverty and disease abstracted the people who had attachments to Buttermilk Bottom as a place rather than a district on the map. The abstraction laid the groundwork to remake the space.



Figure 3: Demolition of C.W. Hill Elementary School (GSU Special Collections)

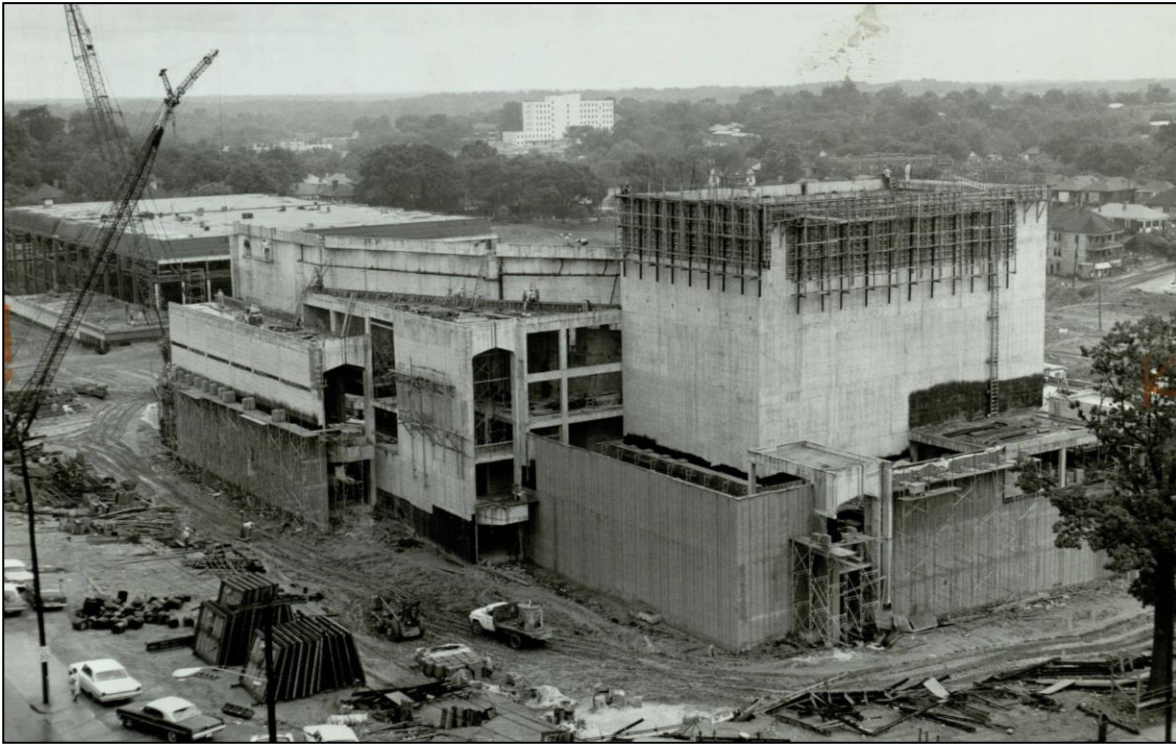


Figure 4: Civic Center Under Construction (GSU Special Collections)



Figure 5: Atlanta Civic Center Complex (*Atlanta Business Chronicle*, 2016)



Figure 6: Atlanta Civic Center Complex (*Atlanta Business Chronicle*, 2016)

4.3 Civic Center Complex as prized real estate

Between 1967 and 2014, the Atlanta Civic Center served as one of the city's primary venues, hosting everything from concerts to commencement exercises, Olympic events to Presidents. After almost 50 years of use in various functions, discussions surfaced on proposed redevelopment initiatives for the Atlanta Civic Center. In 2004, early discussions linked the redevelopment to the coming of the Georgia Aquarium, the new World of Coca-Cola, the newly minted Ivan Allen Boulevard, and development at SciTrek (Pendered 2004). Later in 2007, discussions mentioned the possible demolition of the Civic Center to be replaced with a new performing arts theater to be competitive with newer venues (Pendered, 2007). As the discussions continued, the question became: fix it up or tear it down? The complex's woes in competing with newer venues became more prominent as the aging facility began to show the need for physical improvements after decades of underinvestment (McWilliams 2011)—and, of course, the continued suburbanization of Atlanta, which drew regime actors' attention away from the downtown core. Thus, what was once a celebrated institution for the city of Atlanta became depicted as a drain on municipal resources.

By 2014, City of Atlanta officials began taking major steps towards selling the Civic Center complex and introduced legislation to pave the way. Under the proposal, the city would transfer the property to Invest Atlanta, the city's economic development arm, which would design a bid process and request proposals from developers to revitalize the site. Selling the civic center would advance the city's plans of shedding properties not generating property tax revenue. Officials explained that the aging Civic Center, with a capacity of 4,600 theater seats, had played host to such cultural fixtures

as the Atlanta Opera and touring Broadway shows, and the campus was once home to the SciTrek museum. The city represented the space as having served an important role in the city's past—but one that was no longer needed. Officials further explained that major touring shows often bypassed the center for the Fox Theatre and other newer, modern venues. A 2012 city analysis projected the Civic Center would lose \$400,000 per year through 2017 in its [2012] condition (Trubey 2014). Thus, in the early 2000s, the discourse of the site was that of economic space—and one that was costing the city money.

In October 2014, Invest Atlanta issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Atlanta Civic Center Site. As the site's owner, the city listed the primary objective as selling the site and repositioning it as an active center for generating jobs. Feasibility analyses undertaken in the years prior to the RFP recommended the repositioning of the Site for new development. The RFP explains in the project overview: "The Civic Center represents one of the largest assemblages of land in downtown Atlanta, and the successful redevelopment of the Site is of paramount importance to the City and the future of Downtown, Midtown, and the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood." In other words, the "assemblage of land" is seen as connective tissue for the city as a whole. Heralded as one of the city's major and prized future redevelopment projects, Invest Atlanta explicitly stated that consideration would be extended to any and all uses that attempted to meet the objectives identified in the RFP, conformed to City of Atlanta zoning restrictions, and aligned with community interests.²

² Invest Atlanta, Request for Proposals – Civic Center Site, Atlanta, GA, October 15, 2014

Developers described the redevelopment of the civic center property as a good opportunity to add (economic) value to the district. City officials and developers expressed support for the many projects that could potentially ignite more downtown revitalization (Saporta, 2014). By 2015, selling seemed certain, renderings had been released, and permits had been issued for redevelopment. Texas-based Weingarten Realty Investors' intended renderings featured an initial project phase with plans for 677 apartments and nearly 130,000 square feet of retail space, including a grocery store. Eventually, it would include 250,000 square feet of office space and 250 condominiums (Williams, 2016). Weingarten's plans came to a halt in October 2016 when Mayor Reed ended the process, citing complications and a lack of acceptable terms of negotiations (Stafford, 2016). After resuming discussions in August 2017, Reed announced the sale of the property to the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) in November. The completed sale marked a new chapter in the trajectory of this coveted space (Trubey, 2017). The Atlanta Housing Authority intends to develop a mixed-income, mixed-use project that provides Atlanta residents with the opportunity to live and work in the city—much as the residents of Buttermilk Bottom did fifty years prior.

5 CONCLUSION

Under the guise of urban renewal, whole communities were erased from the map in the United States in the 1960s. Designated as “slums,” these areas were treated as places without a history (or with history considered shameful, one to be edited out),

without status, and without claims to certain rights of possession of urban space. All the differentiated places, landmarks, streets, and houses were cleared to make a blank slate for the modern version of the city (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998). In Atlanta, the story of Buttermilk Bottom provides the perfect example for understanding the massive destructive forces of urban renewal. It also offers competing discourses of a place over time from differing vantage points.

Buttermilk Bottom was a vibrant community of African-American-run schools, churches, and businesses. It was a district of shotgun houses and juke joints, low-lying and poorly drained – a haven, a community—indeed a place—created by segregation. Former residents were displaced when the city leveled and cleared the district, and streets were realigned or removed. The transformation was so extensive that most people had even forgotten or never even knew that there had ever been a place called Buttermilk Bottom (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998). After being replaced by the Atlanta Civic Center complex, what had once been a thriving community, now only existed in the memories of the people who interacted with the space in a previous time. Now, more than half a century later, the place formerly known as Buttermilk Bottom, now the antiquated Atlanta Civic Center complex continues to draw attention and conversation, as it has yet again become a hotspot of contention during a new process of redevelopment in the continuously evolving real estate market of metropolitan Atlanta. The transformation of this “assemblage of land” has been possible through the racialized discourses of the area as one of disease and poverty (as black) to one of economic value (reflecting the white supremacy of racial capitalism). These powerful discourses shaped the material changes of the site from one of a place-based

community to that of a municipal auditorium and most recently to that of a site of real estate speculation.

The discussion of Buttermilk Bottom provides an example for examining connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place. This case study highlights racialized politics in urban renewal and the resulting alterations of the built environment in Atlanta during the 1960s. It further provides a lens to view and a historical narrative for understanding the complexities of contemporary redevelopment at the Atlanta Civic Center complex. Discourses of urban renewal and neighborhood-based community in Buttermilk Bottom also provide an excellent window through which to examine the construction and reconstruction of racialized places. The case study of Buttermilk Bottom presents an illustration of Hayden's (1995) power of place, showing the connection of people's lives and livelihoods to the urban landscape and space, even through decades of change. The oral interviews revealed many themes to connect the former residents' lives and livelihoods to the urban landscape and space they called home, even after urban renewal and redevelopment altered and continues to alter the built environment, as they knew it. The discourses presented Buttermilk Bottom as a community, as a slum, and as prized real estate, supporting Cresswell's (2004) definition of place as being both simple and complicated, presenting opportunity for further examination of its complexities.

Essentially, connections between racialized politics, redevelopment, memory/historical significance, and the meaning of place as examined and highlighted through the stories of Buttermilk Bottom and urban renewal, and the

development/redevelopment of the Atlanta Civic Center site, foster a better understanding of how discourses of race, place, and development have shifted in Atlanta over the course of the mid to late 20th century, into the early 21st century. The discourses of residents themselves, often overlooked in accounts of place, reveal an important past, that while born of racial segregation, reflected close-knit neighborly relationships and institutions. These discourses contrast with the highly racialized accounts of the place as diseased and poor—and ultimately laid the groundwork for thousands of homes and stores and churches to be demolished. City leaders described the great value of transforming the site into an auditorium and parks for the (white) city at large. And decades later the city portrayed the site as once again ripe for reinvestment—eventually to return it to a place of homes and stores, stitching together the intensely gentrifying neighborhoods of Old Fourth Ward and Midtown. The (racialized) place of Buttermilk Bottom has been constructed, erased, and reconstructed through time, providing a useful backdrop for this project, which unites my research in geography and history.

Ultimately, this thesis provides a lens to view and frame—and challenge—contemporary discussions about redevelopment and preservation in intown Atlanta’s valued commercial and residential real estate. Its varying impacts can inform planning, practices, and politics; contributing to development agendas that are more responsive to community needs, culture, and heritage. Additionally, the stories and accounts of former Buttermilk Bottom residents can enlighten and prompt readers to reevaluate other notions and misconceptions about the neighborhood, Atlanta politics, and urban renewal in general.

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