James Ivey

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The Commercialized Gaze:

How Online Tourism Ads Privilege the Tourist Space

Atlanta has a long history of disappointing its reputation as a city of racial harmony and civil rights by selling out important black cultural centers or predominantly black areas to the ideology of neoliberalism that inspires cities around the world to finance and construct high-rises and skyscrapers in an effort to economically invigorate the city. Despite the detrimental effects supporting the tourism and convention industry has had on the black population in Atlanta, the city advertised and continues to advertise itself as a space of racial harmony even as it continues its exclusion of African-Americans and other minorities from its most predominant tourist spaces. Thus Atlanta constructs itself to tourists as "The city too busy to hate," while ensuring that the majority white tourists will never themselves have to encounter a minority – or any resident of the city.

Though in the past this advertisement was done through travel guides or television commercials, tourists now primarily gain their information through the internet, and so cities have shifted strategies to follow suit. As John Urry argues, the result of all this advertising is that the tourist has a preconceived notion of what the visited city is like before even having left for it.[1] As the city wants tourists to consume in order to gain profit from them, the advertised spaces are almost entirely things or places to buy, spaces to spend money. The tourist gaze is thus intentionally tamed towards capitalistic pursuits by the city itself.

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[1] Larson, Urry. "Gazing and Preforming," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29 (2011) 1110-1125

Taming the tourist gaze produces a feedback loop which produces and reinforces the way a city is perceived by outsiders. The city advertises an attraction to tourists who then visit it, increasing its popularity and thus increasing its visibility online, ensuring that more tourists will visit the space in the future. Thus a "face" for the city is created that reflects only what the city wants its visitors to see as opposed to what its residents may actually do within the city. In essence there is a face for tourists cultivated from above and a face for citizens built from below.

The way in which Atlanta advertises itself online is a continuation of the way in which it has advertised itself in the past: towards wealthy whites with a desire to visit a city that appeals to their ideal racial demography. In the process, Atlanta has hidden a history of displacing and impoverishing its black minority, a process that continues to this day.

To understand the development of the tourist's face, a selective survey of the history of Atlanta's support for the tourism and convention industry is necessary. This history stretches back over a hundred years with the construction of streetlights along Peachtree Street in 1909, afterwards dubbed, by Atlanta, The Great White Way[2]. Atlanta was attempting to compete with the growing tourist industries in other cities at the time by making its streets safer for visitors, but only certain visitors. As Harvey Newman reveals the street was illuminated only for whites wealthy enough to enjoy its privileges – minorities and poor whites were removed from the street.[3] Thus, from the earliest conception of its tourist industry, Atlanta was projecting itself as a spot for wealthy whites to come and visit at the expense of its racial minorities.

Given the events of both World Wars and The Great Depression, the next major development in the Atlanta tourist industry occurred in the 1960s with the destruction of three

[2] Newman, Harvey K. "Race and the Tourist Bubble in Downtown Atlanta." Urban Affairs Review 37, no. 3 (January 2002): 301-321. Education Source, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2016).
[3] Ibid., 305

city areas in order to build tourist attractions, facilities, and hotels. It is in the timeframe in which the Downtown Marriot, now the Sheraton, the Civic Center, the Municipal Auditorium, and the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium were built. Newman argues that these buildings kept Atlanta competitive globally, but at the cost of over 55,000 African American resident's homes, which were destroyed.[4] The tradeoff was 1,300 hotel rooms.

With the election of Jackson as the first African-American mayor of a southern city, many were hopeful that this would lead to a reversal of displacement policies. Instead, as mayor Jackson doubled down on the cities' commitment to neoliberal policies and the growing tourism industry. Jessica Ann reveals in *Selling Atlanta* that at this time mayor Jackson allocated $165,000 to be used towards advertising Atlanta abroad, to be handled by the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau.[5] Local civil rights leaders "indicted Jackson of selling out to the downtown white economic powers."[6]

Ann goes on to argue that this policy of supporting tourism produced a forties and fifties like growth pattern in Atlanta.[7] That is to say, the large scale movement of people out of the city Atlanta to the outlying suburbs that now contain a majority of the daily commuters to Atlanta. Left behind, as in the forties and fifties, was the poor minority population unable to afford either the move, the car to commute, or both. Supporting the tourist industry, then, directly contributed to the impoverishment of Atlanta's remaining downtown residents.

Now impoverished, the final blow to the remaining downtown population came with Atlanta winning the bid to host the 1996 Olympics. The importance of the 1996 Olympics to the

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[4] Ibid., 307

[5] Levy, Jessica Ann. "Selling Atlanta: Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990." Journal of Urban History 41, no. 3 (May 2015): 420-443. Humanities International Index, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2016).

[6] Ibid., 425

[7] Ibid., 426

demographics of present-day Atlanta cannot be overstated. Events such as the Olympics come only once for most cities, and thus provide unprecedented opportunity for disenfranchisement and corruption as the city scrambles to fix its perceived flaws in time for an audience of hundreds of thousands. In *Progress and Prospects for Event Tourism Research,* researchers expound upon exactly how important events are for tourism, to the point where the city will often build new accommodations or attractions just to hold the event.[8] Atlanta constructing MARTA in time for the 1996 Olympics is a perfect example of how cities alter themselves to try and support events for the tourism they bring in.

In *Displacement and the Racial State in Olympic Atlanta,* Seth Gustafon reveals to us that around 30,000 people living in Atlanta were displaced in preparing for the Olympics.[9] This mostly occurring in what is now the Centennial Park area. Now in Atlanta there exists a huge swath of tourist places and convention centers in what used to be a heavily populated area. Today this is the downtown tourist district, which still has an incredibly low population density even for the sprawled city of Atlanta.

Seth Gustafson argues that this displacement was, rather than being motivated solely by ambitions to create attractions in populated areas, intentionally enacted in order to shift the demographics of Atlanta's tourist area. Atlanta, in his words, "worked to create a particular demographic image of the city, one without the homeless, public housing residents, and other low-income Atlantans who were also predominantly racial minorities."[10] This for the goal of

[8] Getz, Donald, and Stephen J. Page. "Progress in Tourism Management: Progress and prospects for event tourism research." Tourism Management 52, (February 1, 2016): 593-631. ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2016).

[9] GUSTAFSON, SETH. "Displacement and the Racial State in Olympic Atlanta 1990-1996." Southeastern Geographer 53, no. 2 (Summer2013 2013): 198-213. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2016).

[10] Ibid., 199

creating a "complex but specific demography… that confirmed to a biracial, prosperous, and harmonious vision of itself."[11]

Now the modern Atlanta landscape has been fully realized, the removal of the resident population enabling the white tourist to engage in the commercial activities advertised to them by the city of Atlanta without having to worry about their racial sensitivities being offended. The downtown tourist district is a bubble, as Newman puts it, a bubble that prevents the tourist or business traveler from interacting with the full-time resident, creating portions of the city that have life only as they have tourists.[12] This distinguishes tourism in Atlanta from tourism in other global cities where the tourist population frequently intermingles with the resident population, and as a result even when there are not tourists there are still locals around to support the economy of the area – unlike in Atlanta.

Now that we have reached the modern stage, we may analyze the advertisements presented to the average tourist. What initially appears on a Google search for "places to visit in Atlanta" is a logical place to start with, as it is the easiest step one can take to start planning a trip to Atlanta. The results that come up, in their own special box, are reflective of the majority of what is advertised to tourists visiting Atlanta. The World of Coke, the Georgia Aquarium, Olympic Centennial Park, Fox Theatre, The High Museum of Art, CNN Center, The Martin Luther King Jr. Historic District, and Turner Field all are prominently displayed as the places to visit when going to Atlanta. The majority of these destinations are downtown or within a short walk from it.

Wikipedia echoes these destinations with its own eerily similar list of tourist destinations. To be clear, I am not using Wikipedia as an academic source. I am arguing here that it is likely

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[11] Ibid., 209
[12] Newman; 320

that a tourist would visit Wikipedia when planning out their trip, and thus knowing what Wikipedia says helps one understand the mind of the tourist. Reading about potential places to visit in Atlanta on Wikipedia is part of the tourist experience, it cannot be separated from the actual trip because it precludes and plans the trip, and this holds true for any advertisement of Atlanta a person sees when researching for a trip.

Moving on to how Atlanta explicitly advertises itself, Atlanta.Net, the "official Atlanta City Guide" is an Atlanta made website produced for the purpose of proposing certain events and features to potential tourists. The first thing seen upon opening the website is a view of Downtown from the Bank of America plaza roof, offering a full view of the hotels that surround Peachtree, Centennial Park, and the Georgia Dome – the places built over the houses of displaced African Americans, and now the home of an astonishing 844 people.[13]

Continuing through the website, visiting a list of "50 fun things to do" leads to a reiteration of all the aforementioned spaces within the top fifty, along with advertising Atlanta Movie Tours, the Georgia Dome, and the Atlanta Streetcar in the first ten items. Thus the "fun" things to do are entirely tilted towards commercial activities with a heavy bias towards those activities which take place within Downtown itself, the most heavily governmentally curated area of Atlanta demographically.

The list of places to eat downtown is a list of restaurants along Peachtree Street, the ones that accompany the hotels and Centennial Park. Brave's All-Star Grill, Agatha's a Taste of Mystery, Benihana, The Sundial, etc… All of these restaurants are designed almost exclusively for tourists, with their high price tags and hotel-side locations. Some of them, such as The

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[13] Citydata, [Atlanta, Georgia (GA) income map, earnings map, and wages data]. Retrieved March 24, 2016, from http://www.city-data.com/income/income-Atlanta-Georgia.html

Sundial, are within the hotels themselves and require a bill minimum or even enforce a dress code to dine there!

In contrast to this list, Atlanta Food Walks offers restaurant tours around Atlanta's Sweet Auburn district, commoditizing a historically black area based on its heritage value though providing an arguably more native experience with the large number of locally owned stores and restaurants the tour visits, including several cities within the Edgewood Municipal Market. This is in opposition to a number of activists within Atlanta who disagree with the commoditization of a black cultural center. JFJ Inwood reveals local feelings on the matter, telling us that residents of sweet auburn want to look to the future, not to the past,[14] Meaning that they would rather see Sweet Auburn reinvigorated rather than preserved. It should also be noted that, though the experience is arguably more authentic than Atlanta.Net's list of downtown restaurants, the demographic it is advertised to is the same. Pictures on Atlanta Food walk's website AtlantaFoodWalks.com still feature almost exclusively older white people.

The featuring of only old white people in photos meant to relate to the tourist researching their visit is a common feature among many websites providing tours or advice for when visiting Atlanta. Peachtreefoodtours.com, atlcruzers.com, and tripadvisor.com, websites that are almost guaranteed to show up when researching for a trip to Atlanta, and they all, in their photographs, display a prominent lack of racial diversity. This is important because these photos are meant to relate to the tourist, meant to draw them to consume, and as such photographs shown on the website are chosen based off of the demographic being advertised to.

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[14] Inwood, JFJ. "SWEET AUBURN: CONSTRUCTING ATLANTA'S AUBURN AVENUE AS A HERITAGE TOURIST DESTINATION." Urban Geography 31, no. 5 (n.d.): 573-594.Social Sciences Citation Index, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2016).

The playground shaped after the letters A, T, and L in Woodruff Park downtown, itself sometimes advertised as a place for tourists to visit, functions well as a microcosm for understanding how tourists perceive Atlanta's face. The ATL is a government built playground, curated to produce a certain image. It is stylized, clean, and, when advertised online, completely removed from the context of its location - a hundred feet away, homeless play chess in the park every day, much like how the tourist space exists right next to, but removed from, the homeless population of downtown Atlanta, including a homeless shelter two blocks away from the hotel district. Across the street from the ATL sign is a beaucoup of locally owned restaurants, Broad Street, which consistently win awards for the quality of their food and have an arguable claim to being Atlanta's downtown food street. Broad street is but a few blocks from the hotels that dominant Peachtree, and during lunch hours can be seen flooded with both locals, students, and business travelers who frequently visit Atlanta and are, at the least, tired of the standard hotel-side fare. Also just south of the ATL sign is the location of, just in recent memory, three stabbings and several shootings, some of which fatal. Much the same way that, just a short walk from Centennial Park, is Bankhead, Atlanta's most violent district.

This, then, is Atlanta's carefully cultivated face that it presents to tourists. Removed is the cities' predominantly black homeless problem, the cities' local restaurants, the city's problem with violent crime, the entirety of the city's residents are removed from the tourist experience! Of course a city advertising itself would want to exclude problems of crime and poverty, but it is the tourist industry itself that has heavily exacerbated these problems of crime and poverty. By advertising itself as being racially harmonious abroad, Atlanta deflects attention from the problems it has created for itself. The tourist industry in Atlanta today, as in the past, exists as a vehicle for shifting demographics and covering up racial tensions within the city, and only by

calling out the way that Atlanta has devastated in black population in support of this industry can we hope to begin the process of repairing the damage done.