

# Mobility, Race, and Climate in Postwar Atlanta

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During the 1980s and 1990s, Gwinnett County, just northeast of Atlanta, was one of the fastest growing counties in the country, more than tripling in size in twenty years, from about 160,000 to almost 600,000 residents. Like many fast-growing suburban counties, it was facing its share of infrastructure pains during this period, as the stream of new residents crowded schools, shops, and especially, roads. Increasing pollution also meant that the county, like much of the region, was in violation of federal air quality standards, which could eventually mean the suspension of federal road funds. In response to this, county officials and activists began pushing for the creation of a county-wide bus system. Many residents were supportive of the plan because it would help the mobility of the handicapped and senior citizens. But even many of those who were in favor were adamant about one thing: No MARTA [Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority].

"I've been opposed to MARTA in the past," Lawrenceville, Georgia resident Maclyn Smith told the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* in 1995, referencing the official acronym for the Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transportation Authority that had begun operations in 1971. "That being the case, I think a private bus system would be appropriate on a limited basis."<sup>1</sup>

Why were Smith and others supportive of transit, but opposed to MARTA, which was the state-legislated mass transit provider for the region? Crime and taxes. Smith said they had voted against bringing MARTA to Gwinnett because it would create a news sales tax, and would give criminals "easy access" to the area. Even Gwinnett should not have a county-wide system, Smith argued, because

it would give “the ghetto access to the rural areas.” Others polled in the article echoed Smith’s sentiments. “I don’t believe we need anything like that in our lives right now because it would make our lives more difficult with more crime,” Cathy Pines of Sugar Hill said. “No it will bring a lot of different people in here and make things too much like Atlanta,” Dee Dee Adams, also of Lawrenceville, said (“Views Divided on County Missing the Bus” 1995, 109). Gwinnett County would go on to create its own bus system a few years later, with both local routes and express buses to other parts of the Atlanta metropolitan area. Multiple proposals to merge the systems have failed, most recently in 2019.

In 2020, metropolitan Atlanta and its sprawling suburbs are some of the most carbon-intensive regions in the United States. On a per-household basis, the majority of this comes from carbon dioxide emissions from transportation, particularly from cars, trucks, vans, and sport utility vehicles.<sup>2</sup> And Atlanta is not unique. Similar suburbs all across the country, but mainly in the “Sun Belt South,” are tremendously auto-dependent. This makes suburbia one of the biggest contributors to America’s carbon footprint. Thus, if we are going to try and understand what drives climate change in the United States, and the hurdles to noncarbon sustainability, then we have to understand why American cities, and especially the suburbs, are so completely built around the car, to the hostile exclusion of almost all other forms of mobility.

Explicating automobility in American life is difficult, however, because the system is so naturalized—among the general public, but also among scholars. Most popular explanations for automobile dependency argue that it’s an American “way of life,” which historian Peter Norton (2009) calls the “love affair” thesis of American automobility. Policy and urban historians provide more complexity, pointing toward road construction subsidies, low-density housing patterns, and how land development patterns shape automobile use, leading to the creation of what Chris Wells has dubbed “car country” (2012; cf. Gutfreund 2004; Rose and Mohl 2012; Seely 1987; Shelton 2018). Nevertheless, the dominance of the automobile and its seeming intractability as the dominant form of metropolitan mobility in the United States is still largely unquestioned in histories of the modern United States.<sup>3</sup> But the reality is that the carbon-spewing system of automobility we live with today was not predetermined by American culture, or even social developments and policy decisions made in the first half of the twentieth century. It is very much a product of the past half-century. During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States faced a significant metropolitan mobility crisis brought on by the postwar resurgence of automobility. In cities across the country, residents wailed over increasing traffic and longer commute times, all the while bemoaning the decreasing quality of public transit service. City leaders, including downtown property owners and large corporations, rapidly tried to formulate new solutions. At first they remained committed to new roads and highways, but escalating antihighway protests in the 1960s shifted the debate, and many American cities worked to create viable mass transit alternatives to individual automobile use during the 1960s and 1970s (Kobrick 2010; Isenberg

2004; Mohl 2004). Aided by billions in federal government funding, a number of cities built new rail systems from scratch during this period, and dozens more purchased and stabilized previously private bus systems, providing real “public” transit for the first time (Schrag 2014; D. Jones 1985; Young 2015).

All of these efforts were birthed from a core conflict over whether or not the American city could be reconciled to the automobile. But, other than the antihighway protests, which were an important part of these debates, this moment has been marginalized in both academic histories and popular narratives about urban transit. This is because the American city did not reconcile itself to the automobile. The car won. With the few notable examples of cities that had robust pre-war systems, like New York and Chicago, American metropolitan transit failed to provide a viable alternative to the automobile, and the car quickly became embedded—physically, culturally, and politically—as the primary, and in many ways the sole, means of metropolitan mobility in American life.

What was the reason for this victory? The short answer is race. The battles over cars, highways, and public transit in most American cities occurred at the same time as the Black freedom struggle, and in many cases, these two conflicts became wrapped up into each other. From Rosa Parks and the Freedom Rides to protests against urban highway construction, civil rights activism was often directly or indirectly about equitable access to democratic forms of mobility, or against the destructiveness that automobility brought to Black communities.<sup>4</sup> The success that many Black communities achieved was often pyrrhic, as whites abandoned public transit systems in ever increasing numbers for the private and segregated sanctity of the individual automobile. The spaces of urban transit became thoroughly racialized from the 1960s forward, and thus largely delegitimized to many whites, who not only refused to use public transit, but also were opposed to funding it through tax dollars or having services extended into their suburban communities. Their solution to the metropolitan transportation crisis was to funnel subsidies to road system expansion and upgrades. The goal was to maximize mobility options for white suburbanites, with the result of confining low-income city residents to poorly maintained and operated transit systems, and creating a feedback loop of ever worsening traffic and carbon dependency for the entire metropolis.

This process of racializing mobility, and particularly of racializing more efficient, less carbon-intensive forms of mass transit, was to firmly tie race to energy use, and thus to climate. This is a key part of understanding what Andreas Malm has called “history in climate”: the social and political conflicts that led to the adoption of carbon intensive systems. To Malm, struggles between workers and factory owners in northern England led to the adoption of coal as a “prime mover” that was more flexible than water turbines and allowed capital to break the backs of labor (Malm 2017). In the United States many of the social conflicts that have led to the adoption of carbon intensive practices revolve around race, particularly in the post-Civil Rights era automobile metropolis. After the civil rights successes of the 1960s, whites began experimenting with more decentralized,

ad-hoc, and theoretically “race-blind” solutions to maintain metropolitan segregation. The majority of these solutions centered on suburban housing. With the lack of centralized planning in American cities and the proliferation of suburban municipalities, towns, and townships, suburban whites could use local zoning and development restrictions to great effect to block the construction of public housing, apartments, and really any form of domicile that might be affordable and accessible to Black city residents (Danielson 1976; Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2004; Frug 2013; Trounstein 2018). But opposition to public transit, especially to the extension of any routes or lines from the city center, became important as well.

The racial delegitimization of apartments, public housing, and mass transit meant that in suburbia whiteness became embedded directly within the most energy intensive forms of metropolitan infrastructure, especially single-family homes on large lots and the centrality of the automobile. The result of all of this was to turn the American metropolis, and especially its sprawling suburbs, into a simultaneously racialized and fossil-fuel-dependent landscape—what we could call a racial petro-scape.<sup>5</sup> This was a “landscape of intensification” where the ever-increasing addiction to fossil fuels was being driven by racism. Every new zoning law meant more single-family homes on large lots, in single-use developments that required a car just to drive to the grocery store, to the local school, and to jobs and leisure activities (C. Jones 2016).

This story played out differently in each American city. Atlanta is particularly interesting because a vibrant and successful local Black freedom struggle was embedded within a rapidly growing metropolitan area that was constantly struggling to deal with its traffic problems. Local white elites were eager to address these issues with a modern commuter-rail and subway system that would put the city on par with the great industrial cities in the northern part of the country. But their aspirations ran into the complex racial politics of the post-Civil Rights South that required navigating a newly empowered Black electorate and political class, and a newly embittered and racially hostile white working and middle class. This played out in the late 1960s and 1970s, as Black residents and leaders were opposed to the original MARTA rail plans, demanding that any new transit proposal prioritize upgrading the city’s decrepit bus system, which was the primary form of public transit for thousands of working-class Atlantans. This requirement led to a series of political compromises that by the 1980s had undermined the system’s fiscal viability, limiting the ability to expand service even as the metro region’s population exploded. These structural challenges then became exacerbated by a new era of racial panic. Suburban whites, who had originally fled to the suburbs to escape integration, now used the fear of urban crime to fight any attempts to extend train or bus service into their single-family home utopias. The result of all of this is that by the turn of the twenty-first century, Atlanta was America’s poster child for dysfunctional, racially inequitable, environmentally unsustainable urban mobility.

For most narratives about Atlanta's traffic, pollution, and climate woes, the key year is 1965. That was when Cobb County voters declined to be part of a five-county district that would make up MARTA. Opposition to the system was firmly motivated by the politics of race and white flight. "These people feel that they were evicted from their homes, so to speak, by politics of Atlanta. They're afraid of Atlanta's control," Georgia State Senator Kyle Yancey, who represented Cobb County, explained to a newspaper reporter in advance of the county-wide vote. By "these people," Yancey references the many white Atlantans who moved to Southern Cobb in response to the general desegregation of public facilities and schools that began during the 1950s. Those in the southern part of the county, bordering on Atlanta, wanted to make sure that the city "stopped at the Chattahoochee River," which was the municipality's northwest border (Herbert 1965, 7).

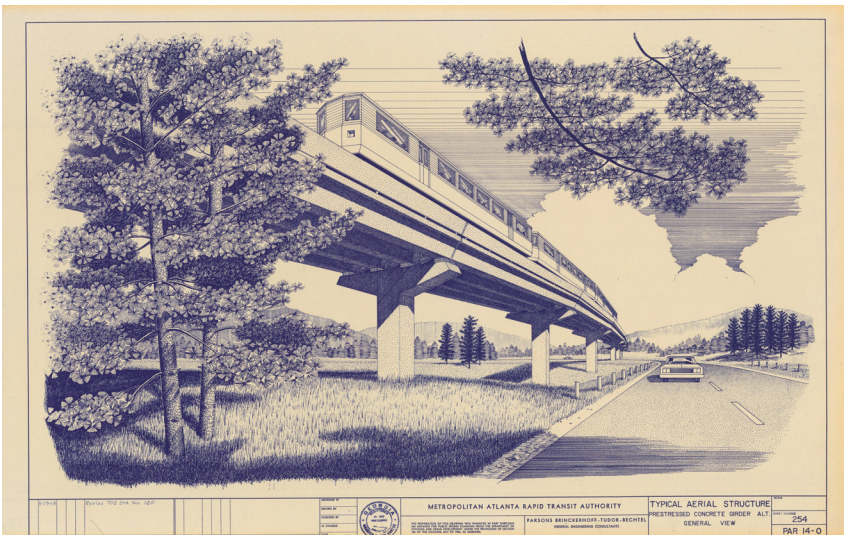
Cobb's opposition is often considered part of an emerging suburban "color-blind" conservatism. Residents sought to disassociate themselves from metropolitan political issues, especially those that dealt with racial inequality, by claiming that their social and economic privileges had little or nothing to do with race. Within this context, color-blind conservatism was primarily used to rationalize support for a retreat from urban social policies, especially those that benefitted the urban poor (Kruse 2005; Lassiter 2006). And this was definitely part of the Cobb opposition, right down to the emergence of a new Young Republican organization that made significant waves in opposing the transit system. The group, formed to support Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, created a "Rapid Transit Truth Committee" that released a series of reports in advance of the vote asserting that the rapid transit system was too expensive and unnecessary, that it was worthless to try and save the city with transit, and that industry was moving to the suburbs ("COB GOP Opposition to MARTA" 1965; Kruse 2005).

But in the larger context of Atlanta's politics in 1965, Cobb's defeat of MARTA was actually an outlier. Four other counties did approve the system, and in Cobb 44 percent of voters approved the transit plan. The majority of county officials supported extending mass transit to Cobb, and the opposition by the Young Republicans and a conservative group in the county "to the right of the John Birch Society" was mocked by a local columnist. Calling the opposition to MARTA "dial-a-fear," the *Atlanta Constitution's* Bruce Galphin equated it with criticizing railroads, airports, and other forms of technological progress. "Where the heck, by the way, was Dial-a-Fear when they started flying airships into Atlanta? People belong on the ground anyway, and the airport is just an obvious scheme to make Atlanta rich at the expense of the suburbs" ("Commentary on Opposition to Transit 'Dial a Fear'" 1965; "Cobb County Transit Referendum 1965" 1965).

To many of Atlanta's political and business leaders and commentators, Galphin's sarcasm was not an outlier in Atlanta in 1965; the voters of Cobb County

were. The mark of a modern metropolis like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, they believed, was an urban rail network. If Atlanta wanted to compete, it needed to build one. This sentiment was not exclusive to the legendary Sun Belt boosterism of the “city too busy to hate.” After suffering for more than three decades in the face of depression, war, and—most importantly—the swift rise of the automobile, rapid transit had a renaissance in the United States in the 1960s. Twenty years earlier, city leaders had looked to new urban freeways as a savior that would bring suburban shoppers and workers back downtown. But by the end of the 1950s, traffic and congestion were becoming enough of an issue for daily commuters that many were beginning to rethink their passion for highways. Plans emerged for balanced systems that would include both freeway investment and new rapid transit lines that would swiftly bring suburbanites into city-center jobs and shopping (See Image 1) (Schrage 2014). In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Urban Mass Transit Act, which provided grants to cover two-thirds of the capital costs for metropolitan systems. Although many older cities in the Northeast used these to upgrade ailing infrastructure and rolling stock, younger cities, like Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, planned systems from scratch (D. Jones 1985; Young 2015).

Atlanta’s white elites conceived MARTA under this commuter model. Like many American cities in the years immediately following World War II, Atlanta was dominated by a “growth coalition” that brought together corporate presidents, downtown real estate magnates, and politicians in a bid to ensure the continued



**Figure 1:** A schematic from one of the earliest engineering plans for the MARTA rail system in the 1960s. Note how the tracks are elevated above a highway, reflecting how the system was designed to augment, not replace, the automobile. Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority Digital Collection, Georgia State University Library.

economic success of the central city. In some places, such as Pittsburgh, these efforts revolved around preparing the city for deindustrialization (Cowan 2016; Teaford 1990). But in Sun Belt cities like Atlanta, it was also about trying to transform the city into an elite American metropolis, and most of these cities proposed some sort of metropolitan rail network. Atlanta's plans, developed in the early 1960s by regional planning agencies, called for essentially a north/south series of lines that would connect the well-heeled, in-town suburbs and Buckhead and the farther-afield locales of Norcross and Marietta with the central city. Similar to systems in Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, the hope was that if a trip was comfortable and convenient, the white-collar office worker would ditch their car for transit, easing pressure on roadways and ensuring a steady market for downtown commercial real estate. "To attract patrons, the system must and will offer a fast, economical, comfortable ride—completely safe and dependable," a 1962 consultant's report argued (Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Study Commission 1962).

With the federal government providing the majority of capital costs through the Urban Mass Transit Authority in 1964, city leaders believed they had a model to create a metropolitan system. It would cover five counties—DeKalb, Fulton, Clayton, Gwinnett, and Cobb—and be approximately sixty-six miles, with two main lines and what were essentially two suburban spurs. The next challenge became getting approval for the system. It took four separate local referendums before MARTA was created and then the system was funded. In the first vote, in 1964, all five counties approved an amendment to the state constitution to create a mass transit system. The second, in 1965, was to actually form MARTA as an agency. It was in this referendum that Cobb backed out of the system. The third vote, in 1968, was to fund the system. This failed in all four remaining counties by a significant margin. The fourth and final vote, in 1971, successfully created a sustainable, long-term funding source for MARTA, but passed in only the two counties that included Atlanta proper: Fulton County and DeKalb County (Keating 2001).

Within the annals of Atlanta history, the failure of Cobb and then Clayton and Gwinnett counties to approve MARTA is considered to be the most important example of the racially driven "suburban secessionism" that doomed the city to such horrible traffic (Kruse 2019; Monroe 2012). But although the antitransit motivations of white suburban voters are important when it comes to understand how Atlanta, like most American cities, became such a sprawling, carbon-intensive metropolis, that is only part of the story. The other, often ignored aspect is that the 1968 referendum was also soundly defeated by Black voters within the city of Atlanta. Why that was, and how Black voters were eventually convinced to support MARTA three years later, is key to understanding race and mobility in Atlanta—and that is to understand what pushed the city down an ever more carbon-intensive path.

Over the past half-century, the core concept in Atlanta politics has been the creation of an interracial governing regime. Since the turn of the twentieth century,



Atlanta had developed one of the New South's largest and most influential Black middle classes, which by the 1940s had been able to carve out a significant amount of political power. White politicians and business elites, through a combination of pragmatism and paternalism, worked to accommodate the Black community as junior partners in the city's growth coalition. Although most white leaders believed in segregation, they were also keen to burnish the city's image to a national and international audience. This ultimately allowed Black activists and community leaders, through negotiation and compromise, to successfully push basic desegregation reforms during the Civil Rights era. As Kevin Kruse and others have shown, the period was no less contentious than in other Southern cities, but white Atlantans just removed themselves from public facilities like buses, parks, and schools as these were being desegregated, with many leaving the city entirely through white flight (Bayer 1996; Kruse 2019; Stone 1989).

Combined with the dramatic breakthroughs of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, white flight gave African Americans a significant amount of political power in Atlanta by the end of the decade. They exercised this in 1968, when a referendum to fund MARTA, via property taxes, was on the ballot. Although many Black leaders and advocates for the Black poor welcomed the progressive nature of the funding mechanism, in general they pushed their community to vote against the proposal. Concerns were numerous: there was a lack of MARTA connections to public housing complexes with Black residents, and the first line constructed would overwhelmingly serve white neighborhoods. In general, many felt that the system was designed to serve white suburbanites and downtown business owners, and not all city residents. Moreover, there had been virtually no outreach by the referendum proponents to gain the support of the Black community and address broader Black concerns, such as equal employment guarantees for construction, contractor, and employment positions (See Image 2). After the defeat of the referendum, the general lack of engagement was glaring. According to a later analysis of the defeat by research staff at the University of Georgia, "it was not until the last week of the campaign that a black 'community relations representative' and a black secretary for the MARTA office were hired, and these were the first members of the staff to be dismissed after the defeat" (Keating 2001, 118–19; cf. Coogan 1970).

Within Atlanta, the defeat of the MARTA referendum was noteworthy for a number of reasons. Downtown elites were "simply used to winning," in the words of MARTA board member Alexander Smith, and so took the campaign for granted (University of Georgia Department of Political Science 1981, I-2). Postmortems of the election pointed out the lack of information about the system that was available to voters—the exact routes were still being planned—and the general haphazard nature of the campaign. MARTA leaders and staff would work to address these issues before asking for funding again. But the other lesson was that they had been short-sighted to take the Black vote for granted, and so they worked assiduously to address Black concerns before putting another referendum to fund the system on the ballot in 1971. This



referendum passed, and Black community and electoral support was key to its success. That support was not simply won with better outreach, but through a fundamental reorientation of MARTA to address the needs and priorities of the Black community, particularly around the issue of mobility (University of Georgia Department of Political Science 1981).

One of the key critics of the MARTA plan had been the Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference, a civil rights coalition headed by Reverend Sam Williams and Jesse Hill, an insurance executive. Hill and Williams argued that the system presented to the voters in 1968 was intended for suburban whites and downtown (white) business interests. "The system is designed for the rich at the expense of the poor," Williams said. "The plans fail to take into account the people who most urgently need rapid transit. Two sections, Thomasville and Perry Homes [both large, majority-Black public housing communities], have no lines, but there are numerous branches and spurs in affluent areas," Williams said at a 1968 press conference. In other venues, Hill had pointed out that the apparent neglect of a bus system, which was the primary form of transit for many in the Black community, in the MARTA plan symbolized to many in Atlanta that this was a system designed by and for the white community ("Negro Group Raps Plans for Transit" 1968; Bayor 1996).

Most histories of MARTA rarely mention the bus system, but it was a key component of the MARTA controversy. It is also vitally important to understanding the racial politics of transit in Atlanta, which helped lead to the metropolitan region's dependence on carbon-intensive and climate-altering automobility (University of Georgia Department of Political Science 1981). Like all public transit systems in the South, Atlanta streetcars and buses had been segregated since the 1890s, with strict rules regulating where Black passengers could get on or off, where they could sit, and how they could be treated by the white drivers. Public conveyances were notoriously contested spaces between Blacks and whites. Arguments about proper behavior and seating location were common throughout the Jim Crow era, so much so that white drivers became notorious for their violent treatment of Black passengers. Drivers routinely belittled and insulted Black riders, kicked them off the bus, or struck them during altercations. In addition to poor treatment, Jim Crow systems also poorly serviced Black communities. Black leaders and passengers routinely complained that the public systems refused to extend service to their communities, and often those that did offer service were not integrated with other companies, resulting in expensive and time-wasting transfers and longer rides (Hale 1998; Kelley 2010).

Thus the desegregation of the transit system, like all desegregation campaigns, was not just about removing yellow lines on the bus or allowing Black passengers to sit next to white people. It was forcing the system to see the Black community as a full and equal constituency. This meant respectful and courteous treatment on the bus, but also full accommodation of Black mobility needs, which primarily meant a well-run and affordable bus system. Atlanta's buses had been quietly desegregated in the late 1950s, but white riders still fled

the system in droves, vacating the integrated spaces of the bus for the private sanctuary of the automobile (Bayer 1996). Census data shows that even by 1960, the vast majority of Atlantans who rode the bus on a regular basis were Black. Only small sections of working-class white communities, on the city's South side, rode the bus with any frequency. By the end of the 1960s, this divide was even more pronounced. The bus system was primarily used by poor and working class Black Atlantans (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

In the aftermath of the failed 1968 referendum, city leaders and MARTA proponents realized that the Black vote would be vital to funding the system into the future. To accomplish this, they made a series of straightforward but also significant moves. Outreach and lobbying to the Black community was increased, and previous outside critics were brought into the fold. Hill was appointed to the MARTA board in 1969 and a prominent civil rights leader was hired as a key spokesperson (Wright 1969). But the biggest move was arranging for purchase of the Atlanta Transit System (ATS), the private corporation that ran the Atlanta bus system. ATS had been in a transit "death spiral" for more than a decade. Because it was completely dependent on fares for its operating budget, decreases in ridership caused a drop in revenue, which usually ended up in a combination of rate increases and service cutbacks, both of which further decreased ridership. By 1970, the system's manager, William Maynard, claimed that it was on track to lose almost \$1 million within the next year. He lobbied the city and state government to cut taxes on the system (as a private franchise it paid almost \$1 million per year in various fees) to keep it afloat. But over the course of 1970, MARTA officials developed a plan to purchase the beleaguered bus system. Through the UMTA, the federal government promised to pay about \$10 million of the estimated \$15 million purchase costs, as long as MARTA then would upgrade the system, improving routes and the overall experience for riders (Maddox 1971; Stepp 1970; Teel 1971; Miles 1971).

In more general accounts of MARTA's history, the ATS purchase is an afterthought. But an examination of sources from the city's Black community show how much this decision shifted the politics of race and mobility in Atlanta. Although MARTA officials promised system integration, newer buses, and better routes, the most important part of the bus system integration was a lower fare. Immediately upon passage of the 1971 referendum, they promised that the bus fare would drop from forty cents to fifteen cents and remain that way for the rest of the decade. The low fare was seen by some as a ploy to lure in low-income voters, but that would have ignored the fundamental concern many in the Black community had about constantly rising fares. "We have one of the highest bus fares in the nation, and our people do not have the corresponding salaries to go with them," an editorial in the *Atlanta Voice*, a Black community newspaper, argued when commenting on the hike to a forty-cent fare in spring of 1971 ("Where Will Increases Stop?" 1971, 2).

MARTA officials developed alliances with key members of the Black community, but there was no consensus about supporting MARTA in Black

Atlanta. There was also some active opposition, including a loosely organized "Cross-City Citizen's Committee Against MARTA." Black critiques of MARTA were wide-ranging, but the most salient was opposition to the new funding plan. The 1968 referendum had been to approve a property tax increase that would fund MARTA, while the 1971 referendum shifted toward creating a 1 percent sales tax in each county that would go exclusively toward MARTA, a more regressive system that sparked significant critique in the Black community. Financing the system this way would be a burden on "poor families who spend their money in small amounts," MARTA opponent and noted "maverick" City Alderman Henry Dodson argued ("Dodson, Citizens Committee Question Worth of MARTA" 1971, 8). MARTA officials had debated this when debating the shift from a property tax to sales tax over the previous two years. They knew a sales tax was regressive, but other plans, such as a property tax, polled at even lower levels among voters. Black MARTA supporters argued that a sales tax increase was more than balanced out by the increased mobility and accessibility for poor and working-class people, and especially lower fares. With the drop from a forty-cent to fifteen-cent fare, the average rider would save ten dollars a month, no small sum when many Black families still earned less than \$2,000 per year ("Dodson, Citizens Committee Question Worth of MARTA" 1971; Independent Research Associates 1971).

Despite critiques from Dodson and others in the Black community, it was Black support that led to passage of the 1971 MARTA funding referendum in



**Figure 2:** Unidentified women, most likely drivers, in front of a MARTA bus in 1975. For many in the Black community, well-paying jobs as drivers, maintenance or construction workers that MARTA provided were just as important as better transit connections. Photo by Boyd Lewis/Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.

Fulton and DeKalb Counties, albeit by a slim margin of only a few percentage points. The measure was defeated, by a wide margin, in suburban Clayton and Gwinnett Counties. According to precinct totals, newspaper analysis, as well as polling and research done in advance of the election, the strongest opposition to MARTA came from working- and middle-class whites who were residents of Clayton and Gwinnett, as well as from sections of DeKalb and Fulton Counties that were outside of city boundaries ("Voters in Fulton, Dekalb Okay Rapid Transit Plans" 1971). Motivation for opposition appeared to be based strongly on race. Many of the residents of Cobb had fled Atlanta because of race, Cobb County Commission Chairman Ernest Barrett told the *Atlanta Constitution*. "People fear that rapid transit would give Negroes greater mobility and consider the fifteen-cent fare as a gift to 'a certain segment of the population.'" Residents of the southern portion of Fulton county had been actively trying to incorporate to block "Atlanta expansion." They aimed to create their own police force and prevent the construction of public housing, "which they fear would bring large numbers of Negroes into the neighborhood," a postmortem analysis of the MARTA vote argued (Gailey 1971, 12; Murphy 1971, 10).

This journalistic evidence was backed up by pre-election polling. In early 1971, MARTA commissioned a large-scale survey to gauge voter attitudes about rapid rail and how it should be funded. According to the polling report, white voters on the bottom half of the income scale, categorized by the survey as "blue collar/middle class" and "working/lower class," not only had an unfavorable opinion of rail transit, but they were also opposed to funding the system with a 1 percent sales tax. The survey authors argued this made sense, because this was the income group that is most sensitive to sales tax increases. But whereas Blacks who were surveyed saw how the benefits of funding MARTA could outweigh the drawbacks of a sales tax, lower-income whites did not. When seeking to explain this, the survey authors said "it is possible that racial overtones are part of the cause for this, but it is possible that working class whites are simply more concerned about the tax money that the rail transit would cost to build, and they cling dearly to the power that the auto gives them to get away from things." The report concluded that any ensuing campaign should focus on Black voters and whites on the top half of the income scale, which it called the "limousine" demographic, since they were the most like to support MARTA now or sway to support it into the future (Independent Research Associates 1971).

The victory of MARTA in the 1971 referendum campaign was the result of the political bargain between the city's traditional white corporate and political leaders and the increasingly powerful Black community. But despite this success, the nature of the compromise and campaign would further lead metropolitan Atlanta down the road of carbon intensive mobility. Many middle- and working-class whites had been ambivalent about MARTA in the first place, but after 1971, began to see it as a "Black" system. Not only were the purchase of the ATS and the fifteen-cent fare seen as a "giveaway" to the Black community, but there was active fear among suburban whites that city buses could now be used to enforce

school integration across municipal boundaries, busing Black students from the city to the suburbs. This racial delegitimization of the system further led many whites to see the gasoline-powered automobile as not just their preferred, but their only means of mobility around the city.

The opposition to MARTA in many white communities would have significant long-term implications for the transit system and carbon-based mobility in Atlanta. But the passage of the 1971 referendum had an immediate positive impact for many Atlantans. Simply put, the system took off in the 1970s. By 1975, with lower fares and more frequent and wide-ranging service, ridership on MARTA buses was more than 30 percent above what it had been on the old Atlanta Transit System. Lower fares were especially helpful for lower income riders, but research showed that the system brought in new riders as well (Bailey 1975a, 1975b). Although ridership was a key metric for MARTA's early success, it was not the sole indicator, especially in Atlanta's Black community. In addition to regeneration of the bus system, Black leaders had also pushed MARTA and city officials to guarantee equal access to both construction and operations jobs in return for supporting the 1971 referendum. They wanted Black welders building the new rail lines, and Black drivers and mechanics running the new bus system. This was part of the larger social-democratic vision for Atlanta in the 1970s that would best be represented by the work of Maynard Jackson, the city's first Black mayor, who took office in 1974. Jackson tirelessly pushed for affirmative action in city contracts, so that Black workers and firms would get equal access to the region's billions of dollars in construction contracts (Ware 1971; "Coalition of Black Leaders Endorse Rapid Transit" 1971; Suggs 2003; Hobson 2017; Stone 1989).

The success of the system attracted United States Environmental Protection Agency photographer Jim Pickerell to the city in 1974, on assignment for the DOCUMERICA project (See Image 3). Conceived as a modern update of the Farm Security Administration's New Deal photography program, DOCUMERICA sent photographers across the country during the middle of the 1970s to try and document environmental issues. In addition to photographing pollution and other environmental problems, many images were of efforts to address environmental problems, including new and successful transit systems like MARTA. Pickerell took dozens of photographs of MARTA bus riders in June 1974, with all of the captions noting how much ridership had expanded over the past five years.<sup>6</sup> The success of MARTA's investment in the bus system helped reverse the "death spiral" that had plagued ATS and many other American transit agencies in the postwar decades, whereby declining ridership led to worse service and increased fares, which led to declining ridership, etc. Recent research has shown that this sort of investment is key to making bus systems popular and profitable, even in the "low-rise" cities of North America. Toronto's suburbs, for example, have extremely busy bus lines that also have high levels of "farebox recovery," which means most of their costs are covered by passengers, not by public subsidies (English 2019).



**Figure 3:** Riders waiting for a MARTA bus in downtown Atlanta, June 1974. Ridership boomed in the 1970s, but the majority of patrons were still working class African Americans. Photo by Jim Pickerell DOCUMERICA/EPA.

Atlanta appeared to be going down this path in the early 1970s, when ridership was especially strong. But there were nevertheless cracks in the system by the end of the decade, as administrators were hamstrung by a series of local decisions that had been made years before, as well as a global economic crisis. Research and polling after the failure of the 1968 referendum revealed that subsidizing MARTA with a local sales tax was much more palatable to voters than a property tax. But a sales tax proposal required support at the state level, especially by governor Jimmy Carter. The governor agreed, but a key provision was that at most 50 percent of the money raised would go to subsidize operations. The rest would go to the capital account to pay for the construction of the mass transit rail system. This goal was to guarantee that MARTA would fund the rail lines. But over the course of the 1970s, inflation saw the agency's construction and operation costs spiral upward, all while it was locked into a fifteen-cent fare until at least 1980, another political compromise made to ensure passage of the referendum. The result was that by 1980 MARTA quickly found itself at a crossroads. Demand for services was high, not least because of the decade-long energy crisis. But there was very little funding to add services, and it was very difficult to increase fares, even as annual inflation was more than 10 percent per year by the end of the decade (University of Georgia Department of Political Science 1981; Huie 2014; "The MARTA Fare" 1980).

It is possible to read this as a crisis of bad luck: a series of calculated political gambles (lowering fares and accepting certain funding schemes) intersected



with the pricing pressures of almost a decade of significant inflation. But built within those compromises, and the system overall, were the politics of race and geography that shaped decision-making in Atlanta, and every American metropolitan region, in the postwar era. MARTA was never planned as an intermodal (train, bus, etc.) metropolitan mobility system. It was only designed, essentially, to be a commuter rail system that would shuttle suburban workers and shoppers downtown, hopefully reducing congestion and keeping downtown property values high. Through this, it would also be a symbol of urban modernity for a Sun Belt city looking to compete with the likes of Chicago, New York, and Boston, all of which had mass transit systems. And although this was never made explicit, from conception through construction it was always understood that the target ridership for the suburban rail system would be white. The purchase and integration of the bus system was not seriously considered until 1970, and even then there is significant evidence that pressure from federal transit officials, who also offered funding, is what ensured the final system purchase.

Lack of integration—primarily from a transit perspective, but also racially—meant that MARTA was essentially funding two systems from one pot of money. The gamble, local observers argued, was whether or not ridership would be strong when MARTA opened up its stations in the northern suburbs. If the white-collar workers from Buckhead and other tony communities north of downtown took MARTA into the city, then the construction of the system would have been worth it. “Since World War II, we’ve had this feeling that mass transit is for the poor, that it’s OK for someone else, but I love my car. That tradition has got to change,” MARTA chairman Clay Long said in 1984, on the eve of the opening of four stations in the northern part of Atlanta (Straus 1984, 1). Clay had estimated that in order to reach revenue goals and qualify for additional federal funding, ridership had to increase by 25 percent pretty quickly. The new stations did draw in new riders, but not at the level MARTA officials had hoped, only going up about 18 percent over two years. This was good for the system, but not nearly as much of an increase as was necessary.

The primary problem for MARTA, and for any efforts to reduce traffic, general air pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions in Atlanta, was the booming expansion of the city’s northern suburbs. From 1960 to 1990, the “favored quarter” of the Atlanta metropolis, roughly the areas along and between the Interstate 75 and 85 corridors, grew by more than a million people, almost all white and middle class to affluent. Much of this was “white flight” from Atlanta, but a significant amount were new Atlanta residents who had never lived in the city. White and middle class, they considered the city’s northern suburbs to be the most attractive residential option. But as the suburbs exploded, morphing into even farther-out exurbs, residents and local governments both made a range of choices that reinforced automobility and were actively opposed to other, less carbon-intensive forms of mobility such as public transit. Almost all of these decisions were motivated or undergirded by race: by a desire to maintain



white privilege, white spaces, and white mobility while limiting Black mobility to Black communities as much as possible. The most obvious form of controlling Black mobility, while simultaneously reinforcing carbon-intensive automobility, was through opposition to MARTA, specifically the full extension of the system into the suburban counties.

The needle to thread for white suburbanites was how to make a racial argument that was socially acceptable and politically legitimate. By the 1980s in Atlanta, even the most conservative whites rarely made outright bigoted declarations using racial epithets. They developed a new language and politics of race that did not focus on outright opposition to Black people. Instead they focused on fear of the behavior and social problems within certain sectors of the Black community, particularly the poor who lived in the central city, and argued that the physical infrastructure of rapid transit would bring them into suburban communities. In interviews with reporters, letters to the editor, and public forums, residents said they were concerned about “riff-raff” and “unemployed parasites.” “If you bring MARTA here, you are going to bring the people from Perry Homes out here,” Cobb resident J. P. Lilburn said at a public forum in 1986, referring to one of the city’s largest, and entirely Black, public housing complexes (Roehl 1986, 31). White Atlanta suburbanites were tapping into racial scripts about African Americans, particularly about laziness and irresponsibility, that had existed since at least the nineteenth century. During the 1960s and after, these scripts had been remade to characterize the Black poor as a permanent underclass that was irredeemable and thus undeserving of social support. These were powerful arguments to many suburban whites. They tapped into a broader national narrative about the central cities and the Black poor that was crystallized into a powerful political force in the 1980s. This ultimately resulted in punitive policing policies, the massive expansion of the carceral system, and the gutting of social services—particularly welfare—at the state and national level.<sup>7</sup>

But the most powerful racial script that white suburbanites were able to deploy against MARTA in the 1980s and 1990s were concerns over crime. The argument itself was straightforward: if extended into suburban communities, MARTA would be a “crime train” and a conduit to bring the social problems of the central city, particularly violent crime, to suburban areas. There were two key features to this argument. The first was that MARTA itself was crime-ridden, aboard its trains and especially in its stations. A number of high-profile incidents, including a murder at one station in 1990, brought about often sensationalistic coverage by the local press. This led MARTA officials to invest in security guards (eventually creating its own police force), increased lighting, call boxes, and cameras. It also led to increased reporting on MARTA crime and crime statistics in the local media. All of this effort to show how safe the system was had the perverse impact of emphasizing crime as the major issue that MARTA faced. Officials were even challenged that they underreported crime on the system, leading to an audit by the state government that showed that if anything, MARTA was overreporting incidents: it included crimes that occurred off station

property, and it counted each charge in one arrest as one incident. MARTA was actually quite safe. Almost all of the crime was property based, and very little of it was violent (Brady 1989; Harris 1986; "MARTA Crime Wave Only a Trickle" 1986). Moreover, MARTA was a pretty large metropolitan system that carried more than 200,000 passengers every day and operated a number of large park-and-ride lots, so there were bound to be some pickpockets and auto break-ins. But it didn't seem to matter to many white suburbanites for whom any incident on a MARTA train confirmed deeply held anxieties about crime, race, and urban space.

The racialized fear of crime among white Atlantans was the product of both national trends and local particularities. Since the end of the 1960s, crime had arguably been the primary framework through which the majority of Americans, especially whites, had understood the social problems of majority Black central cities. Concerns over crime drove a series of major policy shifts toward punitive policing and incarceration that began in the 1970s, and that were exacerbated by the War on Drugs policies of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>8</sup> In Atlanta a number of high-profile killings at the turn of the 1980s, including the shooting of a doctor in town for a medical convention and the infamous child murder spree, helped spark a narrative of central-city danger that accelerated over the next two decades. Atlanta regularly topped the list of most dangerous cities in America, and crime became one of the most important political issues in the 1990s, threatening to derail the city's ultimately successful bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics.<sup>9</sup>

Even though whites were fearful of MARTA as a place where crime occurred, there was a simple solution to that problem: don't ride MARTA. And many didn't. In the 1990s Metropolitan Atlanta was about 65 percent white, but whites only made up about 20 percent of daily ridership, and much of that was on the rapid rail lines from the northern suburbs. But many of the fearful believed they could not avoid the crime that MARTA would bring to their communities, and this was also what mobilized suburban opponents. This argument had existed in an anecdotal sense since the original debates over the project in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But it received its most thorough public airing twenty years later, during debates over bringing MARTA express commuter buses to Cobb and Gwinnett counties, and then over a referendum to fully extend MARTA into Gwinnett and make the county a full member of the system. Two weeks before the vote, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* polled 410 likely voters in Gwinnett County. Half of respondents said they believed MARTA access would increase the county crime rate, and 30 percent said that was their primary reason for opposing the system extension (Beasley 1990a). "I think there could be a bad element coming out here that we don't want with MARTA," Norcross resident Tedd Howder said after leaving the polling place on election day in November 1990. "I am not opposed to progress, but you hate to see those bad elements come out here" (Beasley 1990b, 10).

This debate over the MARTA extension was not uncontested. There were a number of countervoices arguing that concerns about crime were overblown,

if not themselves a version of a racial language. "MARTA trains and buses make great public transportation, but they are lousy getaway cars," *Atlanta Constitution* columnist John Head wrote in 1990. "I can't remember the last time a bank robber, with loot in hand, came sprinting up to me at a bus stop and asked 'Did I just miss the No. 2 Ponce De Leon?'" The claims about crime were simply a form of veiled racism, Head argued (1990, A-11). When asked for evidence about how MARTA would bring crime to suburbs, many whites pointed to Lenox Square mall, arguing that the once tony shopping center was in decline because of the opening of a MARTA station, giving Blacks access and increasing crime. But "myths, especially those that are racially tinged, do not die easily," journalist Cynthia Tucker wrote in 1990. Lenox Square was thriving and expanding, she wrote, giving lie to the belief of white suburbanites that "the opening of a MARTA rail station six years ago ruined the once great shopping complex" (Tucker 1990, A-19). The *Atlanta Constitution* went as far as doing a crime comparison study between Lenox Square and Gwinnett Place, the suburban county's major mall. Incidents of crime were actually comparable at both malls, they found, and experts argued that there was no correlation between access and crime. A crime analyst at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C., even said both malls had low crime rates for being such large shopping centers. But local opponents to MARTA were undeterred by the evidence. "If Gwinnett Place mall is already worse than Lenox, just think what it could probably be if MARTA came," Anne Roupe, a noted MARTA opponent, said (Gelb and Beasley 1990, 12).

Evidence and counterarguments did not deter Roupe or any of MARTA's suburban opponents, as Gwinnett County rejected the 1990 referendum by a nearly two-to-one margin. If there was no evidence that MARTA would actually increase crime, why was the crime argument so important in mobilizing opposition? It's because crime, and concerns about crime, was a form of racist language that was accessible and acceptable to white suburbanites in Atlanta, and across the United States, over the course of the 1980s. The Black communities of America's central cities faced a profound social and public health crisis during this period, as decades of disinvestment and deindustrialization intersected to bring about a wave of drug addiction and violence related to the drug trade. Regimes of punitive policing and social policy reinforced and compounded these cycles of incarceration and poverty. But to suburban whites, and in America's mainstream political discussions, this profound social disruption was always filtered through the language of crime. From their point of view, the crack epidemic was not a public health crisis but something that could only be solved, or contained, with massive increases in prison sentences. Urban school districts were massively lacking in resources, but state and federal governments responded with funding for police officers. In Atlanta and elsewhere, some argued that fear of crime was a code word, or dog whistle, masking racist intent. But to many African Americans this sheen of respectability mattered little. It was still a racial language, just one that was more socially acceptable for whites to engage in, no matter how little it was supported by the evidence (Bonilla-Silva 2017).

The racialized “moral panic” over crime in late-twentieth-century America was a powerful cultural and political force that, as Stephen Macek and others have documented, had a major role in shaping right-wing, anti-urban politics among suburban whites.<sup>10</sup> But it also had a significant material impact on the physical landscape of the metropolis and the global climate. Because the spaces of public transit were seen as both sites for and mobilizers of racialized crime, in the minds of many suburban whites they were thoroughly delegitimate—at best a last-resort option for the urban poor, and at worst a dystopian thunderdome of gang violence. The other side of this coin was that the automobile became, in both culture and policy, the only legitimate tool for metropolitan mobility. This further inscribed energy-intensive, auto-centric sprawl onto the metropolitan landscape, making it harder and harder for Atlanta residents, Black and white, to choose a form of mobility that didn’t commit them to spewing tons of carbon into the atmosphere every year.

This intensification of carbon-based automobility was also aided by policy at the state and federal level that helped naturalize the system for Atlanta’s white suburbanites. Despite the size and importance of Atlanta, Georgia was a very rural state all the way through the 1950s, and legislative gerrymandering gave rural legislators a lot of power. To them transportation only meant one thing: roads. The Georgia Department of Transportation was dominated by rural interests all the way through the 1970s, and they prioritized road building over all other forms of transportation, funneling both state and federal dollars exclusively into road projects (Goolrick 1979; Henderson 2006). Although every state had a “roads first” transportation policy in the immediate postwar decades, there was a better chance at long-term balance in states with older, industrial cities with legacy transit systems, like New York and Pennsylvania. Not so in Sun Belt cities like Atlanta, which saw much of their growth during America’s road-building heyday. Here metropolitan mobility became solely focused on the automobile.

Funds for road building primarily came from state and federal fuel taxes, which are collected as excise taxes and built into the price of every gallon of gasoline and diesel. All of these monies go into a “trust fund” to pay for roads, creating a permanent funding source for automobility. For millions of Americans, this naturalized the construction of automobile infrastructure as a type of “submerged state,” where tax dollars, government subsidies, and political decision-making are vital to the maintenance of the system but exist “out of sight” for everyday drivers (Balogh 2009; Mettler 2011). This subsidy for the consumption and mobility of the majority group—middle-class, white suburbanites—meant that their mobility priorities had significant sway over the public purse. This included not only the construction of new state routes in suburban districts, primarily in the more affluent, northern suburbs, but also the widening of existing roads that had previously been two lanes but then were expanded to four or eight lanes (Georgia Department of Transportation 2007).

This naturalization of energy-intensive automobility went hand in hand with the racialization of more energy-efficient forms of public transportation. Whereas

gas excise taxes seamlessly funneled money into road-building projects year after year, any attempt to expand or subsidize MARTA was met with vigorous debate and opposition and characterized as an option only for the city's poor or as a giveaway to the Atlanta's Black community. Carbon-based automobility became an entitlement to metropolitan Atlanta's white middle class, something to be assumed and never questioned. And the same pattern occurred across the United States, as white suburbanites expected an ever-expanding network of roads but vigorously debated any form of mass transit. When we consider that metropolitan automobility is an important part of America's historic and continuing contributions to climate change, it is possible to argue that we can see whiteness in that climate. It is the product of decades of white privilege and racially driven metropolitan mobility policy.<sup>11</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, Atlantans worked to slay the twin monsters of racial segregation and automobile traffic. But it proved an illusory task to create an equitable urban political system where Black residents had real political power and access to good jobs, education, and resources, and simultaneously to implement an affordable and accessible system of metropolitan mobility. Generations of working- and middle-class whites seceded to the suburbs and worked to maintain a new form of racial segregation built around limiting Black access to suburban space. This was about suburban housing, particularly ensuring the proliferation of low-density, single-family homes in homogeneous subdivisions, but also about mobility. MARTA's buses and trains became racialized spaces of social dysfunction that would bring crime and drugs into their suburban idyll. This made the private space of the individual automobile not just the default option for metropolitan mobility, but the only one. This wrapped whiteness into the fossil-fuel intensive form of automobility that would have devastating consequences for the climate, and the planet.

### Notes

1. "Views Divided on County Missing the Bus," 1995, 109. *The Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution* were separate papers during most of the period covered in this article, and will be referred to as such. But they did publish a joint Sunday edition, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, in the 1980s and 1990s.

2. C. Jones and Kammen 2014. For a visual representation of this research, see <https://coolclimate.org/maps>. For density, sprawl, and emissions see also Gately, Hutyra, and Wing 2015; Glaeser and Kahn 2010; Goldstein, Gounaridis, and Newell 2020.

3. In much of the literature, it is taken for granted that policies and decisions of the 1920s and 1930s in many ways predetermined the automobile century. See McShane 1994; Wells 2012.

4. The majority of metropolitan civil rights histories are case studies that focus on all aspects of activism in a particular city. For transit- and mobility-focused works, see Arsenault 2011; Frohardt-Lane 2012; Kelley 2010.

5. For work that has been influential in my approach to race, space, and the city, see Anderson 2011; Hale 1998; Lipsitz 2011; Voyles 2015.

6. Inspired by the Farm Security Administration project of the 1930s, DOCUMERICA was designed to create a record of America's environmental challenges, but also

successes, during the 1970s, but also cement the creativity and credibility of the newly formed Environmental Protection Agency. See Shubinski 2009; Environmental Protection Agency and Pickerell n.d.

7. On the use of racial scripts to define the characteristics of particular groups, see Molina 2010. On the development of particular narratives and conceptualizations of urban Black residents and the impact social policy and policing, see Hinton 2016; Kohler-Hausmann 2017; Muhammad 2011; Weaver 2007.

8. Hinton 2016; Kohler-Hausmann 2017. For an excellent introduction see Hernández, Muhammad, and Thompson 2015.

9. Wiggins 2020. On the Atlanta child murders see Baldwin 1985.

10. On moral panics and the shaping of urban policy and politics, see Davis 1991; Hall et al. 2019; Macek 2006.

11. On the cultural politics of petroleum in American life, see Huber 2013. For a general call to examine the ways that race is embedded, materially within the Anthropocene, see Yusoff 2018.

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