

Secessionist Automobility: Racism, Anti-Urbanism, and the Politics of Automobility in Atlanta, Georgia

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Abstract

Automobility — the centering of society and everyday life around automobiles and their spaces — is one of the most contentious aspects of contemporary urban growth debates at the local, national, and global scale. The politics of automobility is a spatial struggle over how the city should be organized and for whom. Yet there is little research on how this struggle is unfolding, and how that politics is shaping urban space. Part of this stems from the essentialization of automobility in policy and academic discourses on cities. Moving beyond essentialization, this article will explore how contentious political struggles reveal nuanced and diverse discourses and ideologies surrounding automobility and space. Focusing on what I call ‘secessionist automobility’ — using an automobile as an instrument of spatial secession — I examine Atlanta, Georgia’s contentious automobility debate. Secessionist automobility is bound with the blunt politics of race-based secession from urban space, but also more subtle forms of spatial secession rooted in anti-urban ideologies. Implications for local, national, and global contestation of automobility will be provided.

Introduction

Over the last 50 years there have been numerous economic, environmental and social critiques of automobility, or the combined impact on the built environment of the motor vehicle (cars, trucks), the automobile industry, the highway and street networks, and corollary services, plus the centering of society and everyday life around the car and its spaces (Freund and Martin, 1993; Newman and Kenworthy, 1999). These critiques have asserted, like Sheller and Urry (2000), that the automobile is more than just a status symbol or a neutral technology that permits patterns of life that would happen anyway; it has configured modern urban life through distinctive ways of dwelling, production, consumption, circulation and sociality to such an extent that civil society in the US, Western Europe, and increasingly global cities, are societies of automobility. What is more, detractors argue that any reasonable transformation of cities based on ecological sustainability and social justice will surely require political contestation of automobility (Freund and Martin, 1993; Sheller and Urry, 2000).

Such political contestation of automobility is unfolding in the US, Europe and globally. Scholars, activists and policymakers advocate curtailing automobility by reconfiguring urban space into denser, transit-oriented and walkable built forms — a development pattern broadly labeled ‘smart growth’ or ‘new urbanism’ in the US, or

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'compact cities' in Europe. This contestation of automobility is about reclaiming urban spaces from automobiles, limiting their use, and more broadly, changing cultures so that the whole concept of high speed mobility and car ownership is de-emphasized (Whitelegg, 1993; Sheller and Urry, 2000).

Unfortunately there has not been much research on the political contestation of automobility in either the US or Europe, and there are few examples for scholars, activists and policymakers to look towards in order to put their own struggles in context. Exceptions include Dunn's (1998) political defense of automobility in the US, and Vigar's (2002) critical examination of the UK's policy failure to reduce automobility. Yet overall, there is a lack of scholarly exploration of the political struggles over automobility, and I argue that this stems in part from the essentialization of automobility.

By essentialization of automobility I mean that automobility, as a system, is considered a universal given in cities (particularly in the US) and subsequently overlooked as a site of struggle over urban space, while claims of a 'love affair' with automobiles veil the deeper social meanings embedded in automobility. For example, the notion of a 'love' for automobility is often conflated with what I call 'secessionist automobility', or using the car as a means of physically separating oneself from spatial configurations like higher urban density, public space, or from the city altogether. Secessionist automobility is engendered by what Vuchic (1999) characterizes as the relatively low out-of-pocket expense of automobility for the middle and upper classes, resulting in a trade-off of distance for other costs. Households react to poor schools, urban crime, different racial groups, or any other perceived or real urban problem by seceding from spaces where these problems exist.

Secessionist automobility brings with it a blunt racialized, anti-urban politics that has a profound impact on how urban space is produced. Moreover, secessionist automobility suggests that in many cases there is no direct 'love affair' with automobiles, or even with movement, but, rather, that automobility provides a means by which to achieve some other goal not correlated with movement. Rethinking automobility — and the politics of the spaces of automobility — in terms of secession has profound implications for the efforts to create more sustainable and socially just cities.

In this article I discuss how essentializing automobility detracts from a more nuanced understanding of motor vehicles' influence over urban space. I then describe how secessionist automobility is part of a distinctive spatial vision with a significant role in the production of contemporary urban space. Employing archival research of transportation and land use debates, participant observation in the transportation planning process, and interviews with key stakeholders involved in transportation debates, I will examine the role of secessionist automobility in Atlanta, Georgia, a major US metropolitan area with a particularly contentious debate over automobility. Thoughts and questions about the implications of secessionist automobility and the contestation of the spaces of automobility will be offered.

De-essentializing automobility

The broad ambit of this article is that many scholars, planners and public officials seeking to reduce or eliminate the negative impacts of automobility are frustrated by the claims of a universal car culture making political challenges to automobility seem futile. For example, Vuchic (1999) lamented that academics and policymakers have adopted an 'inevitability hypothesis' in the discourse over automobility. This hypothesis suggests that present trends in the growth of automobility are natural and inevitable. Vuchic notes that very influential scholars and prestigious research bodies like the Transportation Research Board (TRB) in the US have adopted the inevitability hypothesis. Indeed, the TRB, which provides advice to the US Congress on transport matters, concluded in 2001 that American politicians are not interested in making cities more transit-friendly and less automobile-

dependent if it means limiting parking supply, increasing fuel taxes, or taking away road space — in other words, directly contesting the spaces of automobility (TRB, 2001).

Similarly, in the UK, Vigar (2002) notes that a 'predict and provide' policy towards automobiles dominates transportation discourses even with calls for sustainable transport investments, and Docherty (2003) laments failures of the Labour Party in implementing policies to reduce automobility. Meanwhile in China bicycles are being restricted in some cities in order to prioritize automobility, and automobility is increasing rapidly, with the media claiming a 'love affair' with cars in much of the developing world (Luard, 2003; Sperling and Claussen, 2004). Broadly, automobility is cast as a natural result of the free market and technology, and although there are many unfortunate side effects, people 'naturally' want to drive and will continue to choose to drive regardless of public policies targeted to reduce driving. Transportation policymakers are resigned to resist policies that restrict or limit automobility out of fear of upsetting an electorate that is perceived to be universally 'in love' with automobility.

This idea of a love affair arises in part from the claim that the automobile is a logical expression of values like individualism, freedom and democracy (Dunn, 1998). But this contradicts the reality that automobility derives from a system calculated to coerce individuals into driving, that subordinates all other modes of transport and ways of dwelling, that requires enormous state subsidy and regimentation of urban space for maximum throughput and speed, and requires a centralized state-backed capitalist oligopoly of oil, highway, automotive manufacturing and real estate control over transportation policy (Freund and Martin, 1993; Urry, 2004).

In the US, think-tanks with significant influence on public policy ignore this hegemonic and coercive power of automobility and instead insist that Americans individually love their cars and will not ride transit or live in compact, walkable cities (Gordon and Richardson, 1997; O'Toole, 2001). The inevitability hypothesis is reduced to one of consumer choice. Furthermore, Dunn (1998) argues that an 'anti-auto vanguard' of academic elites, environmentalists and urban advocates are delusional because they think they can actually roll back the influence of cars over cities.

Such rhetoric has had a chilling effect on the direction of policymaking about urban space, has severely limited what is considered practical and possible, and thwarts serious efforts to create an ecologically sound and socially just urban future — both in the US and globally. Most of all, this essentialization is overly simplistic and deeply misguided. So what undergirds the supposed universal love affair with automobility?

By probing deeper into the discourse and motivations of stakeholders in debates over automobility and urban growth, the idea of a hegemonic car culture can be disassembled. Let us begin by thinking about how mobility is not just movement but also an extension of ideologies and normative values about how the city should be configured and by whom. That is, just as Lefebvre (1991) theorized that the character and nature of produced space reflects the dominant modes of production and social relations within a given society, we must give consideration to how certain forms of mobility contain embedded social relations. For example, Sheller and Urry (2000) refer to automobility as the dominant culture that sustains discourses about what constitutes the good life. Miller (2001) explains automobility as mediating contemporary human relations and as a material expression of cultural life. Automobiles are not just a way of moving, they objectify personal and social values. Indeed Lefebvre remarked that automobility was the epitome of objects and was falsely inculcated into individuals by consumer capitalism (quoted in Inglis, 2004: 204). Moreover, just as Purcell (2001) argues that the 'suburban idea' is a spatial vision in places like Los Angeles, embodying a set of distinct social values, automobility and its spaces contain a package of social values that can be thought of as a 'mobility vision'.

The emerging critical literature on automobility has hinted at how mobility and space are conceptualized together into a mobility vision. For example, Jain (2002) narrates how women negotiate space with distinctive forms of mobility. One of her subjects, a 'soccer mom' purchases a sport utility vehicle (SUV) because it is taller, carries more

things, and makes her feel more secure in crashes, all part of her distinctive mobility vision. Yet questions of how some women conceptualize urban space undoubtedly undergird the 'choice' to drive as well. Does the soccer mom seek to avoid people of other races or classes, or to avoid spontaneous interaction on public streets? Is she motivated to drive an SUV because of media attention to crime, and how does that affect her attitudes towards transit or children walking to school?

Similarly, Gilroy (2001) offers a critique of the racialized marketing of automobility to African American males and the veil of liberation stemming from a black automobility vision. Contemporary young black males are drawn to the allure of speed and autonomy as part of a mythical vision of power and prestige. Gilroy laments that the impulse of liberation through automobility has been subsumed by a commodified, consumer capitalist lifestyle that is corrosive and contradictory. He provides us with a cue that the broader autocentric built environment has been produced, in part, due to racialized perspectives about space and mobility.

The examples by Jain and Gilroy show us that deconstructing the nuances in automobility provides a starting point for its de-essentialization. This de-essentialization is important because it provides more clarity in debates about sustainable and socially just urban futures. In that vein, this article provides some of the results from research on a localized political debate about automobility in Atlanta, a post-industrial, information-oriented city with strong ties to the global corporate system. Conducted from 1998 to 2002, the research included observation and analysis of the venues where debates over automobility occur: news media, government and non-governmental reports, and public meetings, supplemented by interviews with participants in Atlanta's transportation debates. Interviewees (47 in total, with interviews averaging one hour in duration) included elected officials, appointees to transportation decision-making bodies, environmental and neighborhood activists, business leaders and journalists.

Inquiry was directed towards how participants in Atlanta's mobility debate conceptualized space, and how a normative vision of space and mobility were articulated — in essence, a mobility vision. Interviews, observation, and archival analysis revealed that many environmental and urban activists, for example, explicitly frame their mobility vision of reducing automobility and reconfiguring urban space in a framework of environmental ethics or social justice concerns. Civil rights and environmental justice advocates have outlined a mobility vision based on access to opportunity and the right to the city and its amenities. Corporate elites articulate mobility visions such as support for recentralization of development and enhancement of rail systems to bolster property values and the exchange value of the entire region in order to promote an ideology of growth, in line with Logan and Molotch's (1987) growth machine theory. The highway-industrial complex (builders, suppliers and services for automobility), with vested interests in automobility, articulates a vision of more roads and parking space. All of these factions in the political struggle over automobility actively engage in the promotion of their mobility vision through grassroots advocacy, publicity campaigns, direct lobbying of public officials and engagement in the electoral process.

As the query into mobility visions unfolded, an implicit, subtle and circumspect faction was apparent — one that embraced automobility as a tool of spatial secession — especially in the venue of the flagship daily newspaper, the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* and in numerous public hearings observed by the author. This observation was corroborated by the majority of interviewees, who identified race and anti-urbanist ideologies as a major complication in Atlanta's debate over automobility. Remarkably, many interviewees in this research refuted widespread belief in an essentialized car culture, and instead pointed to racism or anti-urbanism as being conflated with the idea of a love affair with the automobile. Since the impulse of this faction was one of secession, 'secessionist automobility' was selected as an appropriate characterization. In what follows, I unpack the significant impact secessionist automobility has in shaping the trajectory of debates about automobility, using Atlanta as a case study.

Secessionist automobility and racism in Atlanta

Atlanta is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the US, growing from 2.9 million to 4.1 million inhabitants between 1990 and 2000, a rate of over 40%, and 2.3 million more people are expected by 2025 (Atlanta Regional Commission [ARC], 2004). During the 1990s Atlanta rose as a leading post-industrial job growth center, and as a node in the global telecommunications and air travel network. Like most North American cities, and increasingly parts of some global cities, everyday life in Atlanta centers on the automobile. The average person in Atlanta drives 30.5 miles a day (*ibid.*). The average Atlanta commuter spends 67 hours, or over 8 working days a year, in congested conditions (Texas Transportation Institute, 2005). These congested conditions last 8 hours a day, the average peak traveler consumes 46 excess gallons of gasoline annually, and congestion costs the average commuter US \$1,127 year in equivalent lost time (*ibid.*).

By 1999 Atlanta had some of the worst air pollution in the US and federal funds for roads, which made up 80% of funds for most major projects in Atlanta, had been suspended as a punitive measure. This made Atlanta a national focal point in debates over automobility (Jaffe, 1998). The suspension of road money was unprecedented in the US — no city had ever been punished for having too much automobility.

Atlanta's corporate elite, a handful of Fortune 500 companies, real estate investment trusts, and one of the nation's largest energy companies, faced negative national press focusing on Atlanta's congestion and smog problem and led to the creation of an entire new government agency, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA, pronounced 'Greta') (Henderson, 2004). This unique agency was to force parochial local officials to clean Atlanta's air by thinking regionally about transportation planning and getting people to reduce their driving. The creation of the corporate-dominated GRTA was thought to herald a new progressive political era in Atlanta, and GRTA was acclaimed for its potential to reshape mobility and urban space. An emerging coalition of corporate elites, civil rights leaders, and environmental and neighborhood activists envisioned GRTA as the conduit for expanding public transit and implementing land use regulations designed to reduce automobility. After decades of hegemonic control over Atlanta's transport and development policies, the highway-industrial complex was on the defensive. The fact that automobility was critically questioned in Atlanta was a dramatic political transformation. Yet this new political arrangement was met with considerable, yet circumspect, opposition. This opposition was expressed in the widely read opinion pages of the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, Atlanta's largest and only metropolitan-scale daily newspaper, and a key venue for regional debates, and can best be encapsulated by a controversial racial crisis that hit Atlanta in 2000.

The racial crisis centered on a young white male baseball player for the local professional team, the Atlanta Braves, who had delivered a racially charged homophobic diatribe to the national sports media. It began when these bigoted comments about New York's subway were widely published:

Imagine having to take the number seven train to the ballpark, looking like you're riding through Beirut next to some kid with purple hair next to some queer with AIDS next to some dude who just got out of jail for the fourth time next to some 20-year old mom with four kids. It's depressing (Pearlman, quoting John Rucker, 1999).

Just as Atlanta's corporate elite were confronting the environmental and social problems of automobility and assuring investors that they were capable of solving complex problems, the diatribe sparked a mini racial crisis and a frenzy of more negative media attention on Atlanta. Syndicated columnists and social commentators asked 'What does [the racist diatribe] say about us?' (Schneider, 2000). Civil rights historian David Garrow (2000) called Rucker a 'human Confederate Flag'. Garrow also stressed that the intolerance expressed in the diatribe was treacherously shared by many whites. Indeed, the controversy was met with roaring cheers by white baseball fans early in the next

season as the controversy drew on, compelling some locals to ask if fan reaction exposed the region's 'redneck underbelly' (Smith, 2000). The social commentary proved embarrassing enough to Atlanta's corporate elite that old stalwarts of corporate/civil rights Atlanta's regime (see Stone, 1989), such as former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young and the retired baseball great Hank Aaron, were called upon to defuse the situation and beg for renewed racial healing (Young, 2000).

In spite of the thousands of self-examining media reports about intolerance and racism, the spatial context of automobility and a vitriolic hostility towards transit and urban life were missed. During the bigoted diatribe, the culprit was driving a large SUV — a Chevy Tahoe — and speeding down a massive multi-lane freeway. While venting to the reporter his disdain for New York's subway, he yelled angry obscenities and made gestures at other motorists from within his speeding cocoon. He held the steering wheel in one hand and a cell phone in the other, continuing to speed, and he said that the thing he hated more than anything else in the world was traffic:

I have no patience. So many dumb asses don't know how to drive in this town. They turn from the wrong lane. They go 20 miles per hour. It makes me want — Look! Look at this idiot! I guarantee you she's a Japanese woman. How bad are Asian women at driving? (Pearlman, quoting John Rucker, 1999).

The woman was white, but to this angry white male, everyone else on the road was in his way. Everyone else was driving too slow or in the wrong lane or did not signal properly. He was being unfairly oppressed by traffic, women drivers and minorities. There was no consideration that his driving might be part of the problem. After spitting into a toll collection device on the highway, the angry white male described his disdain at the possible alternatives to his SUV — a compact urban form with intensive transit infrastructure containing pedestrian and transit spaces where people would have physical proximity to 'others' of different racial, class, gender or sexual orientation. Seen in this context, his SUV was more than just an instrument for traveling through the city. It was an instrument of secession from what he scorned in contemporary American urban space. Public transit was a warren for 'AIDS and welfare queens'. Times Square, a high-density public space, shared by pedestrians, buses, taxis and cars, was full of 'too many foreigners who don't speak English'. Trading the SUV in for a transit pass, and the house on an acre lot in a segregated, low-density suburb for denser, mixed-use developments with shared public spaces was the antithesis of his values and ideologies about space and how he preferred to live. Unwittingly, this angry white male baseball star was practicing a distinctive politics of secessionist automobility, couched in a racialized, anti-urban, anti-density, anti-transit set of ideologies and values — and none of the mainstream press articles that ensued after his diatribe made the connection. The essentialization of automobility was complete in Atlanta's (and the nation's) public discourse, despite focus on smog and suspended federal transportation funds.

It is important to understand the context of this angry diatribe. It corresponded with decades of vitriolic anti-transit rhetoric in debates about expanding transit in Atlanta (and arguably, in cities throughout the US). This racialized animosity towards transit affectively produced full automobile dependency for most Atlantans, and thus contributed to the universalization of automobility in everyday life. As exhibited in Figure 1, Atlanta has a limited geography of transit compared to the geography of the metropolitan area. Since it was established in the 1960s, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) was jokingly referred to as 'Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta'. Every county in metropolitan Atlanta, with the exception of Fulton and DeKalb, had contentious local debates or referendums on either joining MARTA or establishing an independent, stand-alone transit system, all while thousands of white families relocated from the city center to the suburbs in racialized reactions to the civil rights movement. Gwinnett County, to the northeast of downtown Atlanta, had its first failed county-wide referendum on joining MARTA in 1971, a second attempt was made

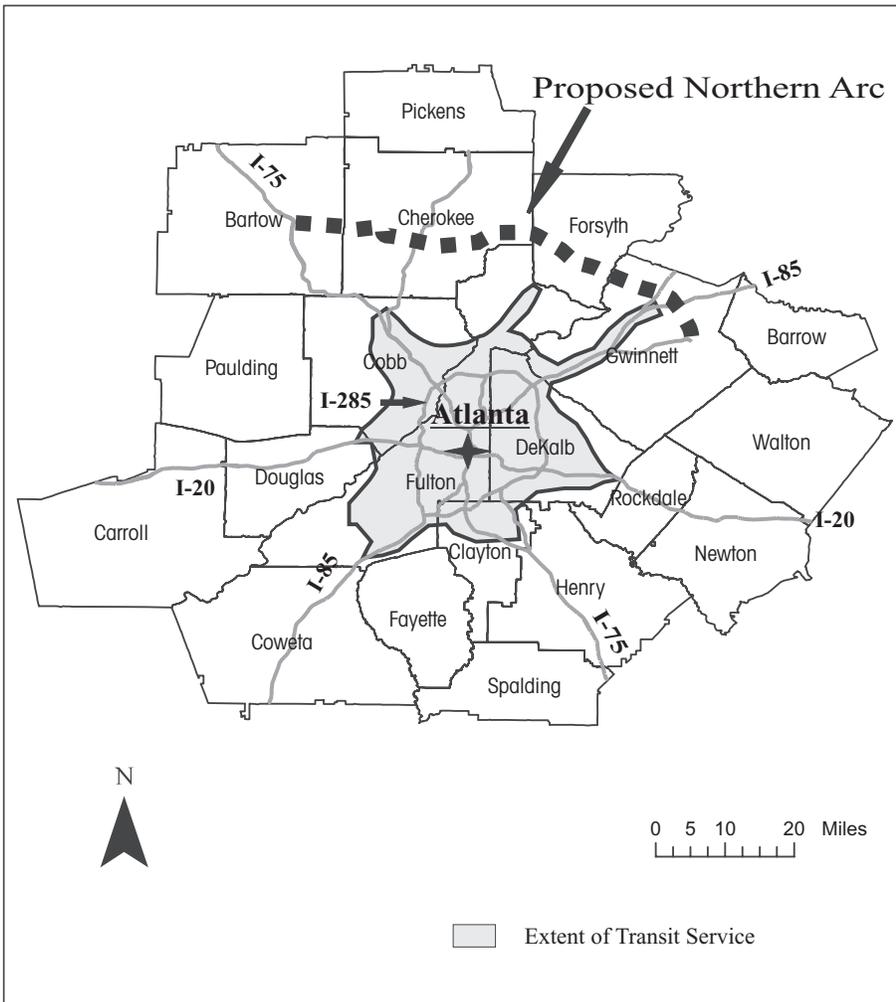


Figure 1 Atlanta metropolitan counties, freeway system and transit service area

in the 1980s, and a third in 1990 (Cordell, 1987; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 1988; Torpy, 1999). All three failed under a cloud of racialized rhetoric and considerable movements of middle-class whites away from proximity to blacks and to separate majority white suburbs (Keating, 2001). ‘The reason is 90% racial’ proclaimed the MARTA board chair in the 1980s (Cordell, 1987). For these whites, automobility enabled physical secession to outer suburban areas while simultaneously providing a means of travel through spaces inhabited by blacks, all without having to interact with blacks.

Coverage of transit debates in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* revealed how deeply race mattered. In suburban Cobb County, the chairman of a local anti-tax organization declared that ‘MARTA-style mass transit would lead to an increase in crime and the construction of low-income housing in Cobb County’ (*Atlanta Constitution*, 1998). MARTA was reviled by racists as a black-controlled urban agency (even though it was

controlled by whites from the corporate elite of Atlanta), in a black-run city with a black majority population.

On the heels of the controversy over Rocker's angry diatribe, the Georgia Association of Highway Contractors ran television spots in 2001 reacting to the suspension of federal road money because of the smog problem. The accompanying video footage showed grim apartment blocks and black people getting off a bus (Ward, 2001). Narrators warned that radical environmentalists threatened to take away Atlantans' right to drive and live where they want. (Ironically this ad attacked 'radical environmentalists' when in fact the business-led GRTA publicly led the promotion of transit.) A couple in the exurban sprawl north of Atlanta stated that they moved to the county because they felt mass transit would never come there, and that 'transit makes areas accessible for lower-income families that could otherwise not come out here because they don't have transportation and that's good' (Wood, 2000).

Most interviewees for this research acknowledged that white racism complicated decision-making about transit. Suburban elected officials acknowledged that a substantial portion of their constituents held racist views. One county official mentioned that at public meetings in her Atlanta suburb, residents loudly protested against the MARTA bus service because blacks would steal TVs (interview with Cherokee County Commissioner, 14 June 2001). Another prominent suburban politician reminisced that just before the 1996 Olympics, a park and ride lot opened in his district to provide transit to the games. The day the sign went up directing traffic to the lot, the county had to reroute overwhelmed phone lines in county offices due to racialized, anti-transit anger (interview with Gwinnett County Commissioner, 13 June 2001). A number of interviewees confided that while they were not personally racist, they understood that many of their constituents were. To remain in office, politicians 'represented' their constituents by resisting transit expansion or higher-density development proposed to explicitly reduce automobility. They instead ensured that spaces of automobility would be the default built form of Atlanta.

Secessionist automobility and the production of anti-urban space

Obviously, racism has much to do with secessionist automobility. The racially motivated physical movement of whites to outer suburban areas in North American and European cities is enabled by automobility, and automobility also enables travel through spaces inhabited by blacks or other minorities without having to interact with them. Moreover, race has been a factor limiting the geography of transit, forcing automobile dependency by design. But secessionist automobility is not simply racially motivated. Interviewees for this research were emphatic in distinguishing racism from an anti-urban ethos, revealing nuances in secessionist automobility. Rather than racialized, automobility was conceptualized as a device to achieve a spatial vision of rural ideals attached to an anti-urban image of the city as a place of vice and immorality.

For example, in public meetings focused on establishing higher-density, mixed-use and walkable 'village centers' in a fast-growing suburb, one planner noted in exasperation that the whole idea was criticized and watered down by citizens who associated the term 'village' with liberal, big government politics, and the residents of the county wanted nothing to do with that (Patton, 1998). Compact, new urbanist development had negative connotations, and transit was equated with 'big city problems' like graft.

What prompts this anti-urban thread of secessionism? Certain conceptualizations of family and religion have a role. Goldfield (1982) suggests that emphasis on personal responsibility towards one's family results in a lack of civic or social responsibility towards public space or notions of community. In contemporary American political rhetoric 'personal responsibility' towards one's family can translate into lack of interest

in collectively solving larger-scale problems such as congestion, pollution or inequality that stems from automobility. Instead, it is 'responsible' to move the family away from these problems — to secede. Meanwhile, Reed (2001) argues, there is an extreme evangelical religious worldview in some households that translates into a strong anti-urban rhetoric. The religious ethos holds a pessimistic view of human nature, and therefore people, especially strangers, are not to be trusted. In a dense city, where there are obviously more strangers, the possibility of vice is amplified. Automobility enables one to circumvent, if not secede from, the perceived evils of the city.

With this combined vision of rural idealism, 'family values' and evangelical religion, the low-density suburbs and exurbs of America surround corrupt cities of ghettos, vice and mob rule (Beauregard, 1993). The 'community' where these anti-urban values are synthesized moves inside, it secedes to the private spaces of home, churches, and clubs (which exclude the undesired). The everyday interaction with other people is homogenous, with church and family comprising the extent of ideas about community, instead of a broader multicultural, ethnic or religiously diverse concept of community. Private consumption of the home and by the family takes precedence over public consumption, what Harvey (1989) described as 'possessive individualism'. Private yards and private malls are preferred over public parks and civic spaces, and most importantly for the purpose of this article, private automobiles are preferred over public transport. Mitchell (2004) extends this to the 'SUV model of citizenship' centered on privatized, unhindered, cocooned movement through public space, whereby people feel they have a right not to be burdened through interaction with anyone or anything they wish to avoid.

The physical manifestation of this secessionist automobility vision is what Goldfield (1997) called 'countrified cities'. Proximity to the rural ideals and nature is realized by low-density, single-detached houses on plots accessible only by automobiles. Everyone drives everywhere for everything. Yet the overall vision cannot be met in a practical sense because metropolitan areas contain the jobs and other urban services modern life depends upon, and so the result is that secession is incomplete. The secessionists still must live in reasonable driving range of the city, and thus opt for the low-density subdivision within a 30-minute commute to work and shopping by car (see Gordon *et al.*, 1991 for an apologetic discussion of the relationships between commute travel times and preferences for lower density). It is for this reason that the average Atlantan drives (or is driven) 30 miles per day and that the spatial extent of Atlanta's sprawling commutershed extends over 100 miles in every direction.

For the secessionist, the reality of proximity to jobs means the landscape is not produced in its image. Moreover, the spaces of secessionist automobility, rooted in both anti-urbanism and racism, conflict with the spatial visions advocated by many of Atlanta's corporate elites, environmentalists and civil rights advocates, which collectively promote a vision that seeks to redirect Atlanta's future development back towards the center, around transit, walking and compact patterns. The spaces of secessionist automobility also conflict with the spatial vision of Atlanta's local highway-industrial complex, which should not be confused with the downtown-centered growth machine, and which has skirmished with secessionists over proposed peripheral highways and other auto-centric developments that threaten the secessionist vision. In the next section I examine how secessionist automobility has been contested and circumvented, and discuss the implications.

Transit détente

The produced space born out of the political contestation of secessionist automobility in Atlanta can be characterized as one of a 'transit détente'. The transit détente is the status quo of continued automobility with limited transit. It is characterized by mediocre

rail and bus service in the urban core and a skeletal express bus system radiating outward, with rail stations and bus stops surrounded by 33,000 park and ride spaces. Spatial configurations meant to reduce the impact of automobility are wanting. As suggested in Figure 1, by 2025 only 10% of work trips will be on transit, and only 40% of the population will live within half a mile of transit (ARC, 2003). Roadway expansions in outer suburbs will be numerous, and almost 80% of commuters will continue to drive alone to work. Comprehensive solutions to the problems associated with automobility remain elusive, despite the attention paid to the negative consequences of automobility.

The transit *détente* arises out of struggle between competing visions of how space should be organized and for whom. The contestation between secessionist automobility and Atlanta's capitalist growth machine is emphasized here to elucidate how the competing visions engage in a politics of automobility. Yet environmental and civil rights groups have had an important role, with their respective mobility visions articulated in the debate, and the local highway–industrial complex perpetuates automobility visions (Henderson, 2004). Each of these factions in the politics of automobility has distinctive mobility visions that cannot be fully appreciated here.

Having said that, and invoking Harvey (1989), Lefebvre (1991) and other urban theorists, the transit *détente*, as a produced space, is the outcome of a struggle arbitrated under capitalism, and capitalists have mediated secessionist automobility. Secessionist impulses conflict with capitalist imperatives to preserve the exchange value of the metropolitan region. While Atlanta's growth machine was aligning with environmentalists and civil rights advocates promoting compact, walkable, transit spaces, with GRTA as a conduit, secessionists were actively fighting transit and increased density, and thousands cheered John Rocker's angry diatribe. How did the capitalist growth machine arrive at the transit *détente* with secessionists?

First, the creation of GRTA, a creature of Atlanta's corporate elites, tempered secessionist opposition to transit. Recall that Atlanta was the first metropolitan area in the US to have federal road funds suspended due to air pollution problems stemming from automobility. Eventually federal transportation funds were withheld, and Atlanta's corporate elite established GRTA in response to this punitive measure. In return for lifting the federally mandated suspension, GRTA requires that any county with a smog problem must accept transit in exchange for receiving road funds. GRTA acts as a referee ensuring that all localities commit to the greater goal of keeping Atlanta competitive in the global economy. If a local county or city in the metropolitan region does not show a commitment to reducing its share of smog, the authority has the power to restrict road funds and redirect them elsewhere. Hence some of Atlanta's more vehemently anti-transit counties now have, or plan to have, some sort of limited bus service (Long, 2001). The demands of capital pre-empted local secessionist tendencies.

GRTA's insistence on extending transit into Atlanta's sprawling suburbs also addresses capitalist demands for access to labor. Secessionist land use policies, such as exclusionary zoning (restricting proliferation of apartments or lower-priced housing), have exacerbated 'spatial mismatch' (Ihlandfeldt and Sjoquist, 1998; Nelson, 2001). Low-skill, low-wage jobs in the retail and service sector are located vast distances from where available low-wage, low-skilled workers live (central city and inner suburbs). In response, and as part of the mission of GRTA, Atlanta's corporate interests publicly promoted bus transit in select corridors to enable low-skilled workers to access far-flung suburban jobs.

Using GRTA's logo rather than the stigmatized MARTA logo has mitigated the racialized resistance to transit. 'There is too much racism in Cherokee for transit in any real sense, but maybe express busses (run by GRTA) would be acceptable', said one suburban politician (interview with Cherokee County Commissioner, 14 June 2001). In some suburban counties retail and service firms even unified to tax themselves to jumpstart a limited bus service and avoid controversial public referendums (Shelton, 1998). 'Mobility 2030', Atlanta's newest iteration of long range transportation planning

(to the year 2030) proposed express buses on radial routes from central Atlanta to major suburban activity centers (where low-wage retail workers were needed) (ARC, 2004). Again, the overarching demands of capitalists, in this case access to cheap labor, superceded, albeit in a very limited way, the spaces of secessionist automobility.

A second example wherein the capitalist growth machine arrived at a transit *détente* with secessionist automobility involved a tacit concurrence between secessionists, the growth machine, and the environmental and social justice movements based in the urban core. In this case, all sides opposed a proposed 59-mile 'Northern Arc' freeway (see Figure 1), albeit for differing reasons. With strong anti-transit ideologies, and fully ensconced in a lifestyle centered on automobility, one might expect that more highways would be welcomed in the politics of secessionist automobility. But across Atlanta's northern exurban fringe, a rhetoric of defending the 'small town quality of life' was deployed by secessionist opponents of the proposed road (Shelton, 1999). That the Northern Arc 'would create precisely the kind of chaos that I have just escaped' was a shared sentiment amongst secessionists, who organized into a grassroots coalition to fight the road (Shipp, 2002). Meanwhile, to the corporate elite in Atlanta the Northern Arc would pull sprawl further outward while limiting the potential for growth in the existing urban core. The road threatened future transit projects in the urban core because it would absorb billions of dollars in federal and state funds that could be spent on transit. Again, sprawl and continued pollution from automobility threatened the exchange value and environmental health of the metropolitan region. Capitalist-financed environmental organizations, such as the Georgia Conservancy, led the fight against the Northern Arc as a proxy for the growth machine (Henderson, 2004).

Lefebvre (1991: 381) conceptualized this type of tacit coalition as a new form of spatial struggle that transcended traditional class struggle over urban space, transcended simplistic defense of locality and led towards struggles over *how* space is configured and utilized. Racial animosity, class difference and moral values were set aside to achieve two diametrically opposed visions simultaneously. Members of the secessionist automobility camp opposed the Northern Arc because it threatened their privileged spaces, their gardens and parks, their nature and greenery, and their homes. The corporate elite, augmented by environmental and social justice interests in the urban core, could set aside their previous antagonisms towards the secessionists over transit expansion, and work in unison to fight the road. In early 2004, after years of bitter contestation, the Northern Arc was defeated by this loose coalition between secessionists and urban-oriented environmental, business, and social justice organizations. It remains officially absent from Atlanta's latest iteration of transportation plans. It is doubtful this defeat would have been possible without the vocal opposition of articulators of secessionist automobility. Yet even though this major road was defeated, the spaces of automobility remain effectively unchallenged.

Spatial implications

The transit *détente* reveals that automobility remains entrenched, not because it is natural or inevitable, but because the interaction between competing visions of automobility have resulted in a stalemate. Corporate elites have not offered a way around secessionist automobility. Capitalist negotiation with secessionists has produced a transit *détente* that will be characterized by a situation where 80% of Atlanta's workers will continue to drive alone to work by 2025 but 45% of all travel (not just commuting) will be in congested conditions. That is, an average motorist might leave her driveway and find free-flowing conditions for part of the journey, only to get stuck in congestion on a local arterial freeway for the other half of the trip. The average Atlantan will still drive about 30 miles a day, but the daily time spent in automobiles will increase by ten minutes for most (ARC, 2003).

Congestion threatens the exchange value of the region, and Atlanta's corporate elites will no doubt seek new methods of coping with congestion such as congestion pricing, parking pricing and toll roads that are designed to manage demand for roads. Part of the current discourse about congestion in Atlanta, and throughout the US and parts of Europe, is in fact about pricing road space (ARC, 2003). The social justice implications of these policies will be challenging, with the privilege of speeding past congestion granted to those willing or able to pay, while the lower classes remain entrapped in a slower manifestation of automobility.

With no regionally impressive transit or roadway expansions, congestion will likely become a form of de-facto growth management in Atlanta. As suggested above, the mobility advantages of car usage will invariably decline and as congestion intensifies, more people will seek to avoid increased daily travel times and move closer to work, shops and urban amenities — if they can afford the move. Partly out of desire to avoid congestion, upwards of 10,000 people moved to central Atlanta after three decades of population decline (Cauley, 1999). A large telecommunications corporation is shuttering its dispersed suburban offices and consolidating around key transit stations. An abandoned steel mill adjacent to downtown Atlanta is being converted into a massive new mixed-use residential, retail and office development. Streetcars and extensive pedestrian infrastructure have been proposed to stitch together a limited area of the urban core of Atlanta (with future funds diverted to the Northern Arc now less likely). However, these recentralizing developments will also have significant implications for accelerated gentrification and may be inaccessible for those who cannot afford the compact, walkable oases in Atlanta's sea of automobility. What is sure, due to the rigorous opposition of secessionist automobility, Atlanta's corporate elites no longer propose expanding MARTA rail or building an extensive commuter rail network with compact development around stations — proposals advocated as far back as the late 1960s. Moreover, under the current transit detent, secessionists can continue to sprawl outward from Atlanta in every direction, but they too will face immense congestion, trading more time driving for spatial secession.

Conclusion

The politics of automobility is complex and nuanced. There are diverse factions in the debate over automobility and a more sophisticated analysis and critique of automobility needs to replace the fatalistic assertion that a love affair makes political challenges to automobility impossible. Essentializing automobility is misleading, unconstructive, and dampens the politics of possibilities. Automobility is not just about movement or the convenience of getting from point 'A' to point 'B', nor is it adequate to conceptualize it as a neutral agent in providing consumer preference or market demand. Rather, automobility embodies deeper social conflicts.

One of these embodiments is secessionist automobility, or automobility as a medium for physical separation and physical expression of racialized, anti-urban ideologies. While some secessionists are both racist and anti-urban, not all secessionists are racist. Nevertheless the shared vision is one of secession from urban space, resistance to the compact patterns that support transit, and abhorrence to resolving difficult urban problems through cooperation and consensus — secession by car is easier.

Secessionists' automobility is arbitrated by capitalists, which in Atlanta sought to mitigate air pollution and congestion, both of which threatened the exchange value of the region. Articulators of secessionist automobility contested corporate elite policies of expanding transit, and out of that struggle evolved a transit détente that provides a limited geography of transit service. Secessionists also stood in the way of Atlanta's highway builders, who sought to build a massive new outer beltway that by design was meant to spur further automobility. Ironically this positioned the secessionists, who

waged what amounts to a culture war against cities, as unwitting allies of the corporate, environmental and social justice interests who at the same time battled them over expansion of transit. The transit détente reflects that transit policy is not aimed at reorienting everyday life for the entire region in order to reduce automobility, but rather, it is a stalemate in a struggle, a stalemate negotiated by Atlanta's capitalist growth machine in attempts to maintain the exchange value of the metropolitan region and remain competitive in the global competition between cities.

We can conceptualize this stalemate over automobility as a spatial struggle that transcends traditional class struggle over urban space, or simplistic defense of locality, and invoke Lefebvre's assertion that contemporary urban struggles are about *how* space is configured and for whom. In cities throughout the world, automobility is a central site of such struggles. This framework enables more clarity in efforts to truly address the plethora of ecological, social and economic problems that stem from automobility. If automobility is framed in a way that focuses on what ends people are trying to achieve, rather than as an essentialized love affair, could arguments against the proliferation of automobility take a different trajectory? What other conceptualizations of how space should be organized are deployed in the struggle over automobility? How will conceptualizations centered on ecological and social justice, which are very much present in global debates about sustainability and cities, counter secession, or negotiate the capitalist arbitrated stalemate in cities like Atlanta? This calls for deeper examination of how automobility is contested locally, nationally and globally, for the struggle against the deleterious effects of automobility will not only continue in the US and Europe, but will likely intensify globally.

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Résumé

L'automobilité — prédominance de l'automobile et de ses espaces dans la société et le quotidien — constitue l'un des grands sujets de controverses dans les débats sur l'expansion urbaine contemporaine aux plans local, national et mondial. En matière d'automobilité, la politique est une lutte spatiale sur la manière dont il faudrait organiser la ville et pour qui. Cependant, rares sont les recherches sur le déroulement de conflits politiques sur ce thème, et sur la façon dont cette politique configure l'espace urbain. La raison tient en partie à l'essentialisation de l'automobilité dans les discours politiques et universitaires sur les villes. Dépassant cette essentialisation, l'article explore comment les luttes politiques sur l'automobilité révèlent des discours et idéologies variés et nuancés autour de ce thème et de l'espace. En m'intéressant à ce que j'appelle 'l'automobilité sécessionniste' — l'automobile servant d'instrument de rupture spatiale — j'étudie le débat sur le sujet à Atlanta (Géorgie). L'automobilité sécessionniste est liée à la politique éculée d'exclusion de l'espace urbain en fonction de la race, mais aussi à des formes plus subtiles de sécession spatiale ancrées dans des idéologies anti-urbaines. Sont exposées les conséquences pour la contestation locale, nationale et mondiale de l'automobilité.