Second Wave Rail-to-Trail Initiatives and Ecological Gentrification: Lessons from New York City's High Line and Atlanta's Beltline

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Urbanites generally agree that city parks are urban oases. In addition to their aesthetic and cultural value, city parks can improve the wellbeing of those living proximate to them by making them more active, less obese, and happier.[1] However, not all city-dwellers benefit equally from parks. Historically, green space has benefitted elites at the expense of the urban poor. New York's Central Park—perhaps America's most famous and beloved park—was explicitly designed to increase land values and encourage development, and required the destruction of the marginalized Irish and black neighborhood Senecca Village.[2]

Yet although Central Park was planned with development in mind, its primary purpose was to serve a moral mission: "to facilitate activities that provided exercise, instruction, and psychic restoration."[3] In fact, the architects of Central Park were disturbed by the fact that urban architecture and commercial life could be seen from within the park; the park was intended to be respite from the city, not a part of it.[4] As Galen Cranz summarizes, "the notion of a park was endorsed as if it were a check on the encroachment of the city rather than a feature of the city itself."[5] In the years since Central Park was built, planners and landscape architects have continued building parks with moral agendas such as simple class uplift, temperance, and quelling potential class unrest.[6] In addition, green space has long served public health and environmental agendas, including filtering air, lowering ambient noise, cooling hot concrete cities, absorbing storm water, and providing places for exercise.[7]

Although early American parks were seen as checks on the encroachment of the city, I argue that parks are now very much part of the encroachment of the city rather than a check on it. While social and environmental arguments continue to be deployed in order to justify the creation of urban green space, political leaders and entrepreneurs are now working together to develop and redevelop land they see as underutilized, and this push to make underutilized spaces profitable is driving park creation. City parks are now being built to satisfy neoliberal ideological goals. According to Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, neoliberal ideology holds that "open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development."[8] I will focus on a few specific features of the neoliberal doctrine: downsizing of public services, dismantling of welfare programs, increased surveillance, and the criminalization

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[1] Wolch, J. R., et al. (2014). Urban Green Space, Public Health, and Environmental Justice: The Challenge of Making Cities 'Just Green Enough'. *Landscape and Urban Planning, 125*, 234-44, at 236.

[2] Byrne, J. (2012). When Green Is White: The Cultural Politics of Race, Nature and Social Exclusion in a Los Angeles Urban National Park. *Geoforum, 43*(3), 595-611, at 598.

[3] Cranz, G. (1982). *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America.* Cambridge, MA: MIT, 8.

[4] Cranz, G. (1982), 232.

[5] Cranz, G. (1982), 5.

[6] Cranz, G. (1982), 238.

[7] Wolch, J. R., et al. (2014), 235.

[8] Brenner, N. & Theodore, N. (2002). Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism". *Antipode, 34*(3), 349-79, at 350.

of the urban poor.[9]

This paper explores the marriage of neoliberalism with another dominant ideology: environmentalism. Sustainability has become potent fuel for the neoliberal agenda. By marketing projects as sustainable, the growth machine easily gains the support of the green-minded bourgeoisie. As Erik Swyngedouw observes, "ecology and the ecological imperative are becoming a new opium for the masses."[10] Rather than hindering unsustainable growth, the concept of "sustainable development" is in fact now being used to protect growth trajectories in the face of a "global ecological crisis" and the rise of popular environmentalism.[11] While the marriage of neoliberalism and environmentalism has been examined in a variety of contexts, this paper examines a context that has yet to be studied: rail-trails. That is, abandoned rail lines that have been converted to running, walking, and bicycling paths. While scholars have not looked specifically at rail-trails, there is an emerging body of research examining city green space, which I will us as the framework for my own study.

It is generally understood that in the twenty-first century, world-class cities are "green." In most American cities, there is no longer empty land for park creation, so the production of green space requires creativity. Many cities, like Chicago, New York, Pittsburg, and Atlanta, are converting abandoned sites—especially rail tracks—to park space. While these megaprojects offer large increases in available parkland, they often come at a high price. Costing hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars, they spawn development in their vicinity, which ultimately displaces residents in the neighborhoods they are allegedly intended to serve. Moreover, the process of creating the spaces tends to be apolitical and the spaces created only quasi-public.[12]

This is not to say that converting rail tracks to parkland is necessarily expensive or detrimental to vulnerable communities. In fact, the Rail-to-Trail Conservancy lists thousands of rail-trails, nearly all of which are relatively inexpensive gravel or asphalt paths running through mostly unmanaged park space. Also note that the process of converting abandoned spaces—especially abandoned rail lines—into parks is by no means new. In 1976, in response to rail lines being rapidly abandoned, the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act was passed, which included a provision to provide grants to preserve rail corridors and convert them to trails. While the rail-trail *per se* is not new, there is a new vision for what rail-trails can be. Rather than being an unassuming bike route, rail-trails can be magnets for development, investment, and gentrification. I shall call these *second wave rail-trails*. While many parks were—and continue to be—created to provide recreational space and ecosystem services to people in surrounding areas, scholars have began noticing that some parks are being built with the goal of profit. As Eliot Tretter concludes in his study of sustainable development in Austin, environmentalism is "much more about creating an environment of sustainable returns to investment than environmental stewardship."[13] Green growth is good business.

The purpose of this study is to build new theory for understanding second wave rail-trails. In order to do this, I will review literature concerning urban green space broadly understood, and then I will conduct brief case studies examining two prominent second wave rail-trails: New York City's High Line and Atlanta's Beltline. For my analysis of the High Line I will tie together a number of scholarly articles, while for the Beltline I will piece together a history of the space through a survey of all newspaper and magazine articles on the topic, which I will combine with emerging

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[9]Brenner, N. & Theodore, N. (2002), 350.

[10]Swyngedouw, E. (2009). The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City: In Search of a Democratic Politics of Environmental Production. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *33*(3), 601-20, at 611.

[11]While, A., et al. (2004). The Environment and the Entrepreneurial City: Searching for the Urban 'Sustainability Fix' in Manchester and Leeds. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *28*(3), 549-69, at 551.

[12]Roy, P. (2015). Collaborative Planning - a Neoliberal Strategy? A Study of the Atlanta Belt Line. *Cities*, *43*, 59-68, at 66.

[13]Tretter, E. (2013). Sustainability and Neoliberal Urban Development: The Environment, Crime and the Remaking of Austin's Downtown. *Urban Studies*, *50*(11), 2222-37, at 2233.

scholarly research for my analysis. By combining the insights of my case studies with the theory in my literature review, I will propose a framework for understanding second wave rail-trails.

But before I turn to the literature review, let me first unpack the concept of converting an abandoned rail line into a trail or linear park. It is important to note that the difference between an abandoned rail line and a linear park is largely a difference in prescribed use. Abandoned rail lines and linear trails both function as public green space, and both provide ecosystem services ranging from carbon sequestration and air purification to recreational experiences. When an abandoned rail line is converted into a park, the prescribed use for the space changes. On the one hand, abandoned rail lines are useful for exploring by youths, recreational drug use, secretive meetings, public sex, and discrete pedestrian transportation for the homeless. On the other hand, linear bicycle and pedestrian trails are used mostly for exercise and promenade. With a change in prescribed use naturally comes a change in visitor demographics. Abandoned railways attract disenfranchised youth and the homeless, but bicycle trails attract the middle and upper classes, as well as tourists. So converting a rail corridor into a linear park is a means to replace low status park users with high status users. One aim of this paper is to explore the mechanics of this replacement, and investigate who gains the most and who suffers.

Low-income residents most vulnerable to gentrification have become even more isolated as the scholarly community has become less critical of gentrification over the last decade. Gentrification literature has shifted its focus from work criticizing the displacement of the urban poor to current work that praises gentrification, calling it a process of revitalization.[14] This paper aims to redress this by looking critically at gentrification and taking the needs of the urban poor into careful consideration.

Divestment, Soft Revanchism, and the Paradox of Greening

Gordon MacLeod uses the term *revanchism* for a policy of retaliation against dispossessed citizens occupying land that is desirable to high-income earners.[15] These high-income earners left the city in the 1970s and 1980s when they migrated to the suburbs, but as they are retuning to the areas they left behind, city governments are deploying punitive and authoritarian tactics in order to take back the inner city for these wealthy citizens. In the case of the battle to take back Manhattan's Lower East Side for gentrifiers, MacLeod points to brutal policing tactics that targeted marginalized members of society, especially the poor and homeless.[16] But beyond zero-tolerance policing, revanchism operates generally amid alleged "erosion of public sympathy for the dispossessed," often cutting funding for public housing and education.[17] All in all, revanchism criminalizes urban poverty.

However, while MacLeod's revanchism can operate blatantly and brutally, I argue that urban nature provides a unique opportunity for growth regimes to "take back" inner city property more quietly than ever before. I will term this *soft revanchism*. Soft revanchism operates by offering the urban poor services—ecosystem services—in form of large-scale green space developments. These parks in turn attract the high-earners, who then facilitate the removal of the poor from their urban commons. So instead of using zero-tolerance policing tactics against residents occupying the inner city, soft revanchism gives these residents a large park and lets the market take care of the rest. All in all, just like MacLeod's revanchism, soft revanchism results in the criminalization of the urban

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[14]Slater, T. (2006). The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *30*(4), 737-57, at 746.

[15]MacLeod, G. (2002). From Urban Entrepreneurialism to a "Revanchist City"? On the Spatial Injustices of Glasgow's Renaissance. *Antipode*, *34*(3), 602-24, at 603.

[16]MacLeod, G. (2002), 607.

[17]MacLeod, G. (2002), 608.

poor.

This process operates in areas shaped by divestment. In times of fiscal austerity, funding for green space is often cut first. While green space funding is usually cut across the board, and does not explicitly target the urban poor, the poor nevertheless suffer most. In wealthier areas, "friends groups" often pick up the slack. Philadelphia's Fairmount Park System, one of the largest in the world, is also one of the most poorly-funded, operating on less than 1% of the city's annual budget.[18] As a result of this disinvestment, over 100 "friends groups" have assumed responsibility for park-related services no longer adequately provided by the city.[19] "Friends groups" can be very effective. In fact, parks maintained by nonprofits are best able to secure city funding and grants.[20] Such organizations are more active in middle-income areas than in low-income areas, which concentrates the benefits of well-maintained public green space to the wealthy neighborhoods in which "friends groups" operate. Lack of park access is worst for black residents, who often have access to the most poorly-funded parks of all. Joassart-Marcelli, in their study of Los Angeles, found that when all funding sources were combined, there was a negative association between black areas and spending.[21] As parks in poor neighborhoods—and especially black neighborhoods—fall into disrepair, the stage is set for gentrifiers to colonize that land.

Locke holds that there is a moral imperative to claim abandoned land through labor and secure it as private property.[22] For this reason, if we follow Locke's logic, when a city or developer sees land that appears to be in disuse, like railroad tracks or vacant homes or even decrepit parks, it is their responsibility to develop that land. Note that the city decides what is abandoned and what is occupied. Not all types of labor are viewed as legitimate means of securing land. In her study of Detroit, Sara Safransky observes that by dispossessing certain peoples and ways of life, even occupied land could be reframed as abandoned land.[23] For instance, the state does not consider the work a squatter puts into their house's upkeep to be legitimate, so the squatter's efforts do not entitle them to the land they reside on. Abandoned spaces can be conceptualized as being like the American frontier: although characterized as an uninhabited, underutilized, untapped resource for capital, many abandoned spaces are actually utilized, just not in a way society deems legitimate. Sarah Dooling observes a process—*ecological gentrification*—which she defines as an environmental planning agenda for public green space "that leads to the displacement or exclusion of the most economically vulnerable human population—homeless people—while espousing an environmental ethic."[24] In her nuanced treatment of ecological gentrification, Dooling does not argue that allowing homeless people to camp in public green space is a viable alternative to ecological gentrification. Instead, she argues for a more sensitive approach to planning that does not ignore or vilify the homeless.

Although green projects have little trouble garnering support from middle class liberals and environmentalists, local residents in poor areas are often skeptical of the projects. Melissa Checker describes a public meeting concerning the transformation of two small triangle parks in Harlem into an expansive green space. None of the local residents in attendance were excited for the plans that alleged to improve their quality of life. Residents asked who really stood to profit from the project,

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[18]Brownlow, A. (2011). Between Rights and Responsibilities: Insurgent Performance in an Invisible Landscape. *Environment and Planning A*, *43*(6), 1268-86, at 1275.

[19]Brownlow, A. (2011), 1275.

[20]Joassart-Marcelli, P. (2010). Leveling the Playing Field? Urban Disparities in Funding for Local Parks and Recreation in the Los Angeles Region. *Environment and Planning A*, *42*(5), 1174-92, at 1189.

[21]Joassart-Marcelli, P. (2010), 1187.

[22]Locke, J. (1988). *Locke: Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge University Press, 288.

[23]Safransky, S. (2014). Greening the Urban Frontier: Race, Property, and Resettlement in Detroit. *Geoforum*, *56*, 237-48, at 240.

[24]Dooling, S. (2009). Ecological Gentrification: A Research Agenda Exploring Justice in the City. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *33*(3), 621-39, at 630.

and local ministers pointed out that the closing of two blocks of road to create green space would hurt their parishioners' ability to find parking for church services.[25] One woman questioned the assumption that kids in the area needed more play space, noting that the area already had three parks. She said instead "We need an adult park. I need a place to go and smoke a cigarette and hang out and shoot the shit."[26] Finally, residents questioned if anyone was looking out for the "winos" and homeless people that spent time in the park.[27] While the green space project was presented as benefitting all, the local residents did not buy this. As Checker concludes, in light of the rapidly rising property taxes in the area, "For whom was the project making Harlem sustainable? Surely, it was not the homeless people or those residents who just wanted a place to 'shoot the shit.'"[28] So here sustainability is tantamount to aesthetic appeal for the middle and upper classes, which in turn leads to gentrification and the displacement of the urban poor.

Although I argue that the creation of green space is often tantamount to soft revanchist policy, there is an obvious rebuttal to my argument. Simply put, it is well documented that low-income residents have less access to well-maintained park space than high-income residents, so there is a moral imperative to redress this problem by adding new parks and improving existing parkland.[29] While it is certainly unjust for low-income communities to be deprived of quality parks, the solution is not as simple as proponents may make it seem. Wolch et al. clearly identify the paradox associated with redressing park-poverty in low-income communities: as new park spaces improve the aesthetics and health of a neighborhood, the neighborhood becomes more desirable. Housing costs rise, and the very residents the green space was intended to serve are displaced as the neighborhood gentrifies.[30] Once residents move away, they are often back to where they started: lacking quality park access and fearing the next big park-improvement project that will push them out. So the project fails to serve the low-income residents it sought to help. Must low-income residents forfeit the quality of life improvements that parks bring in order to resist being displaced?

In fact, residents can have both quality parks and low rent. Wolch et al. suggest a "just green enough" approach, which promotes small-scale green space interventions in scattered sites rather than "grander civic green space projects that geographically concentrate resources and kick-start rounds of gentrification." [31] So a "just green enough" approach avoids creating "a focal point for property development strategies."[32] The best way for residents to avoid displacement is to refuse—if possible—large park development projects, but accept smaller ones.

Lessons from the High Line

Soft revanchism is difficult to detect and to organize against because ostensibly it provides services to communities in need. The urban greening cause it is uniquely situated to take advantage of the power of "grassroots" organizing. Growth projects in turn are in a position to exploit the power of grassroots causes, which come with ready-to-use organizational networks and credibility within the community. In New York, a grassroots movement began in the 1990s with the aim of preserving an elevated rail corridor—the High Line—as a public park. Josh David and Robert Hammond joined

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[25]Checker, M. (2011). Wiped out by the "Greenwave": Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability. *City & Society*, *23*(2), 210-29, at 211.

[26]Checker, M. (2011), 211.

[27]Checker, M. (2011), 211.

[28]Checker, M. (2011), 212.

[29]Wolch, J., et al. (2005). Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity-Mapping Analysis. *Urban Geography*, *26*(1), 4-35, at 27;Sister, C., et al. (2010). Got Green? Addressing Environmental Justice in Park Provision. *GeoJournal*, *75*(3), 229-48, at 244.

[30]Wolch, J. R., et al. (2014), 235.

[31]Wolch, J. R., et al. (2014), 241.

[32]Wolch, J. R., et al. (2014), 241.

that movement and soon began drumming up support from city hall and local celebrities.[33] They then attracted a network of real estate developers to the project, and the two became architects of one of New York's most successful redevelopment plans. Thus developers intending to spur mega-development in the area easily co-opted the grassroots movement protesting plans to tear down the High Line. Within ten years of being announced, the High Line generated a 103% property value increase.

Darren Patrick notes that the ecological argument in favor of preserving the High Line as a green space was a very successful tactic to quell potential opposition to a project that would essentially lead to the elimination of affordable housing in the area.[34] Environmentalists were easily seduced by the promise of greening a formerly "industrial, gritty, and sexualized area of the city."[35] Furthermore, ecological arguments allow some of the brutality of MacLeod's revanchism back into the discussion, this time brutalizing invasive species instead of street people. In the case of the High Line, *Ailanthus altissima* had colonized the abandoned railway, and it became the moral imperative of the city to enforce a zero-tolerance policy against it, replacing it with native species.[36] The crusade to eliminate and replace invasive species with drought-tolerant natives greatly energizes the bourgeoisie. Swyngedouw, in his discussion of environmentalist populism, notes that in such movements the enemy is "vague, ambiguous, socially empty or vacuous and homogenized (like 'CO2')."[37] In this vein, the environmental populists pushing for the High Line were able to rally against their vague enemy: invasive species. Other than eliminating invasives, the only real ecological goal of the project was to provide a few acres of green space, while the financial goal was to anchor billions of dollars of redevelopment. While et al. call this general phenomenon a "sustainability fix," which selectively incorporates ecological goals when it suits city hall and developers.[38]

Beyond just anchoring development, the High Line is itself an entrepreneurial space. Despite being built largely with public funds, it is managed by the private group Friends of the High Line. Kevin Loughran calls it a space "immersed in commercial activity—a product of the neoliberal prescription that public parks must be financially self-sustaining."[39] It is a park built with the intention of financing itself. The city viewed the money put into the project as an investment, which they would recoup from increased property values (and therefore taxes). In an era of fiscal austerity, parks that pay for themselves are very appealing.

Although the High Line is a profitable venture for many, the urban poor certainly do not benefit from its presence. For instance, security practices on the High Line are designed to exclude people who would diminish the aesthetics of the park. Recycling bins are emptied many times per day (despite not being full), presumably to prevent bottle collectors from doing their work on the High Line.[40] The High Line's narrow, linear design—and absence of places to sit or play—promotes a very particular movement through the park: "a bucolic walk from one end to the other."[41] Structuring the use of a park is necessary for policing it. By prescribing a certain use for the park—in this case a promenade—it becomes easy to remove those who intend to use the park for non-prescribed purposes. A family trying to barbeque would surely be removed from the park promptly. This

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[33]Loughran, K. (2014). Parks for Profit: The High Line, Growth Machines, and the Uneven Development of Urban Public Spaces. *City & Community*, *13*(1), 49-68, at 63.

[34]Patrick, D. J. (2014). The Matter of Displacement: A Queer Urban Ecology of New York City's High Line. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *15*(8), 920-41, at 925.

[35]Patrick, D. J. (2014), 925.

[36]Patrick, D. J. (2014), 934.

[37]Swyngedouw, E. (2009), 612.

[38]While, A., et al. (2004), 552.

[39]Loughran, K. (2014), 62.

[40]Loughran, K. (2014), 62.

[41]Loughran, K. (2014), 61.

may seem to be a trivial example, but it brings up an important issue. When land is truly public, citizens are able to determine acceptable uses for it, like cookouts. But in the case of the High Line, citizens do not determine the use of the park. If the park does not answer to the public, is it still a public park?

Prescribing a particular use for a park can also be problematic when it alienates certain users of the space. In her study of Latino use and non-use of Los Angeles Parks, Byrne found that many Latinos there experienced what I term *park anxiety*. They perceived that users of well-kept parks would be white, wealthy and xenophobic. They therefore "feared visiting such 'gringo' parks because they would be singled out for being different, boisterous or just because they were Latino."[42] Beyond just feeling that the parks were white spaces, many felt they did not know the behavioral norms for park use. As Byrne points out, "many of those norms are norms of 'Whiteness' (e.g. quiet hiking vs. boisterous picnicking)."[43] This park anxiety kept Latinos out of Los Angeles's park system, and it could easily keep many minorities out the High Line.

Furthermore, the High Line attempts to differentiate itself from ground level public spaces. This can be observed in the difference between food sold a street level and atop the High Line. At street level, immigrants operate food carts selling lower end foods like hot dogs and soft pretzels, while on the High Line, recent college graduates and middle-class entrepreneurs sell hand-crafted popsicles and artisan ice cream sandwiches.[44] Vendors on the High Line must be selected by management in order to sell their goods. One vendor selected to sell on the High Line recalls that the process took two months, and involved every dish he intended to sell being tasted by High Line management (and the application cost one thousand dollars).[45] So while the High Line is allegedly public, its policies prevent certain groups from selling on it, which in turn makes it a more inviting space for those who desire—and can afford—hand-crafted popsicles, while alienating those who prefer—or are financially limited to—a hot dog. All in all, by discouraging the homeless and recyclers from using the park, and by only allowing trendy items to be sold on the High Line, the Friends of the High Line ensure that it is a space where the middle and upper classes can feel insulated from the realities of urban life below.

Introducing the Beltline

I turn now to Atlanta's latest effort to attract and retain young, creative professionals: a 22-mile loop of bike trails, parks, and light rail known as the Beltline. Conceived in 1999 by Georgia Tech planning student Ryan Gravel in his master's thesis, the Beltline is intended to convert old rail lines into a loop of green space connecting many of Atlanta's largest parks. Cathy Woolard, chair of the Atlanta City Council's transportation committee, picked up on Gravel's idea, formed the group Friends of the Beltline, and soon the two were attending every community meeting they could, promoting their vision. As far as Woolard is concerned, this was a grassroots effort.[46] Gravel agrees, saying "I didn't do it; the people in the neighborhoods did...They lobbied their elected officials. They made it happen."[47] In 2001, the newly elected mayor, Shirley Franklin, recognized that the Beltline could be her legacy, and by 2006 the project was underway. It was put under the management of Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI), which was formed by Invest Atlanta, a coalition of developers and business elites.

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[42]Byrne, J. (2012), 608.

[43]Byrne, J. (2012), 608

[44]Loughran, K. (2014), 61.

[45]Loughran, K. (2014), 59.

[46]Burns, R. (2014). Can Atlanta Go All in on the Beltline? *CityLab* 6 May. www.citylab.com [5 March 2015].

[47]Torpy, B. (2012). Beltline Progress; City Takes Significant Step Along Beltline. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 14 October.

Borrowing the name of Olmsted's famous Boston park system, the Beltline promised to be an "emerald necklace" of green space encircling the city, with the largest parks being the "emerald jewels."[48] From the beginning, the Beltline has been billed as a redevelopment project. In one of the Beltline's earliest feasibility studies, planners promised that the Beltline would "improve vacant or underutilized properties and regenerate blighted neighborhoods."[49] While the Beltline has many similarities with the High Line, it has one fundamental difference: it purports to also be a transit system. Yet as of 2015, ten years into the project, no transit has been incorporated into the Beltline. In 2005, a study of the Beltline concluded that bus rapid transit (BRT) was the best option for the Beltline transit system, on account of being cheap and offering a "rail-like" experience.[50] But after rail advocates slandered the plans for BRT, arguing that people prefer trains to buses, transit plans stalled.[51] MARTA chairman Ed Wall argued that light rail was more sustainable and charming than buses, concluding, "It's quaint, people like it."[52] Thus the bus plans were scrapped in favor of more expensive, quainter rail plans, which have yet to materialize.

Wealthy people certainly prefer trains, since they are aesthetically pleasing and feel safe. Moreover, the presence of light rail, like parks, has a documented spillover effect. In a review of all literature studying the effects of rail on housing prices, Dube et al. found that rail proximity overall had positive effects on property value.[53] Grube-Cavers and Patterson draw a direct line to gentrification, concluding that in two of Canada's largest cities, Toronto and Montreal, rail transit had a significant impact on gentrification.[54] In fact they went so far as to urge planners to take into consideration "how best to mitigate the negative effects of gentrification and displacement" resulting from increased accessibility to light rail.[55] But these concerns seem not to be on the minds of Atlanta's gentrifiers. Even if light rail is built in the Beltline, it may be inappropriate to call it *transit*. A "quaint" system of trolleys running in a loop, connecting residential areas to other residential areas, seems more like a Disneyland monorail. That is, riding in circles around a city-cum-theme park. In fact, I argue that instead of viewing the plans for light rail as a transit system, we should see them as an upscale park amenity. In the arms race to develop the best park in America, perhaps planners see the Beltline trolley as one-upping Millennium Park's bean.

Is it true that the people of Atlanta "lobbied their elected officials" for the Beltline as Gravel claims? Or is it more accurate that developers lobbied for it? If one looks into the Beltline management authorities, it may appear that there are conflicts of interest. For instance, Greg Giornelli, the president of the Atlanta Development Authority (ADA), is the son-in-law of Tom Cousins, a developer deeply involved in the Beltline.[56] State Senator Vincent Fort noticed this conflict of interest, remarking: "it just begs the question of whether or not the business community is the power behind the throne for the Beltline."[57] Presumably that is a rhetorical question, because the business community is certainly behind the throne. It is, after all, good business. In defense of Cousins'

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[48]Garvin, A., et al. (2004). *The Beltline Emerald Necklace: Atlanta's New Public Realm*. The Trust for Public Land, Executive Summary.

[49]Garvin, A., et al. (2004), 2.

[50]Donsky, P. (2006a). Bus Transit Looks Like the Ticket for Beltline. *Atlanta Journal–Constitution*, 9 August.

[51]Donsky, P. (2006b). MARTA Staff Urges Rail for Beltline; Transit System's Chairman Says Upgrade Is Worth Higher Cost. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 11 December.

[52]Donsky, P. (2006b).

[53]Dube, J., et al. (2013). Commuter Rail Accessibility and House Values: The Case of the Montreal South Shore, Canada, 1992-2009. *Transportation Research Part a-Policy and Practice*, *54*, 49-66, at 50.

[54]Grube-Cavers, A. & Patterson, Z. (2015). Urban Rapid Rail Transit and Gentrification in Canadian Urban Centres: A Survival Analysis Approach. *Urban Studies*, *52*(1), 178-94, at 90.

[55]Grube-Cavers, A. & Patterson, Z. (2015), 90.

[56]Pendered, D. (2005). Business Network Steering Atlanta Beltline Project Has Ties to Developer. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 18 July.

[57]Pendered, D. (2005).

seeming conflict of interest, Councilwoman Felecia Moore said, "People do have relationships."[58] But it certainly seems like more than just a relationship. The Beltline is primary funded through a 6,500-acre (8% of Atlanta) Tax Allocation District (TAD). Within the physical boundaries of this district, taxes are frozen at a specific level, and any amount of revenue collected above that level is pumped back into the Beltline development effort. At the time when it was decided to create a TAD to fund the Beltline, four other projects were seeking to form TADs. Despite a council resolution requesting a study of the four other possible special tax districts, the ADA, chaired by Giornelli, chose not to conduct such a study, so the proposed Beltline district did not face any competition.[59] While this was good news for Cousins, who was already developing along the proposed Beltline, it certainly smacked of corruption. To add to the corruption, in 2012, the *Atlanta Journal–Constitution* reported that Beltline authorities were using taxpayer dollars for personal expenses. Charges included expensive meals at local steak houses, $12,500 a month to pay lobbyists, and a request for reimbursement for $10,000 in credit card charges, including $2,500 for a retreat for senior executives.[60]

When the Beltline TAD was created in 2005, a deal was struck with the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) stipulating that the Beltline TAD would give the APS payments in lieu of taxes, totaling $162 million over the life of the TAD. That is, although the APS forfeited all tax revenue within the boundaries of the Beltline TAD, the Beltline authorities entered into a contract in which they would compensate the APS for lost tax revenue. Under the terms of the contract, the Beltline was required to prioritize payments to the APS ahead of funding Beltline development projects.[61] In 2013 the Beltline failed to make an $8 million payment, and in January of 2014 the Beltline failed again to pay the APS $6.75 million. City Attorney Cathy Hampton argued that rather than focusing on the millions owed to them, the APS should instead use their $600 million budget more effectively.[62] Mayor Kasim Reed argued that the Beltline spurs economic development, which in turn benefits the schools, so the APS should be thankful for the Beltline.[63] The logic in Reed's argument is hard to follow, since by design, most of the economic development spurred by the Beltline occurs within the TAD, and never reaches the school system. So the Beltline does not benefit the urban youth who utilize the Atlanta public schools.

In defense of the Beltline, its ambitions to fund itself are partly a response to the underfunded state of Atlanta's park system. In 2000, Atlanta spent $58 per resident on parks, while Seattle spent $160, Minneapolis $144 and Chicago $128.[64] As in other park systems, "friends groups" appeared in wealthy areas in order to maintain underfunded parks, such as the privately funded Piedmont Park Conservancy, which pays for 90% of the park's maintenance and security. The Beltline, in addition to having an overarching "friends group," also enlists local businesses to take care of daily maintenance. Businesses enlist in the Park Pride's park adoption program, and in turn mow grass, pull weeds, clean graffiti and report suspicious activities. The owner of a local fitness club, which was forced to relocate by the Beltline, nevertheless adopted a portion, noting that if the Beltline is in good condition, is helps his business, which is only located a couple blocks away.[65]

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[58]Pendered, D. (2005).

[59]Pendered, D. (2005).

[60]Bluestein, G. (2012). AJC Investigation Beltline Spending; Beltline Expenses Questioned. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 7 July.

[61]Leslie, K. (2014a). AJC Exclusive; Memos: Beltline Dispute Worsens. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 21 August.

[62]Leslie, K. (2014a).

[63]Leslie, K. (2014b). Atlanta Beltline; Dispute with APS Threatens Beltline. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 6 July.

[64]Shelton, S. (2005). The Greening of Atlanta; the Proposed Beltline Project Would Increase the City's Parkland More Than 40 Percent. But for Now, It's Just a Vision. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 14 February.

[65]Stafford, L. (2010). City's Beltline Gets a Boost; Volunteer Groups Will Help Improve Corridor.; Mowing Grass, Pulling Weeds, Cleaning Graffiti Part of Adoption Plan. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 28 December.

By all accounts, the Beltline has been a successful entrepreneurial park. The *Atlanta Journal–Constitution* (AJC) reported in 2013 the Beltline was already proving itself good for business. Articles note that restaurants, cafes, and apartments are opening up around the Beltline.[66] The Beltline's website boasts that the project has "generated a roughly 3:1 return on investment, with more than $1 billion in private redevelopment spurred by roughly $350 million of investment."[67] That return on investment certainly is not going into the public school system.

Displaced by the Beltline

In my review of 301 AJC articles related to the Beltline, "displacement" was mentioned in only three. For comparison, "blight" was mentioned in over twenty articles and "renewal" in thirteen. This is consistent with the silence about displacement that I noted earlier, though here it is the silence of the news media rather than of the scholarly community. There are, however, people concerned about displacement. Many articles appearing in the *Atlanta Progressive News* warn of displacement, and one critic, Dan Immergluck, was loud enough to find his way into the AJC. Immergluck, a professor of architecture and planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology, warns that the Beltline will "create a circle of wealth and an outer ring of concentrated poverty."[68] His study found that a homeowner living along the Beltline with a house worth $100,000 in 2001 would see their property taxes increase from approximately $540 in 2001 to over $1,400 by 2006.[69] That is, before the Beltline was even built, taxes were nearly tripling. Residents of southwest Atlanta are not at all surprised by Immergluck's findings. Clarice Mackie notes, "Houses that once cost $30,000 suddenly started appraising for $150,000. . . No building had happened there for years. Then this Beltline came out and all these speculative builders came in here."[70] The authorities in charge of the Beltline argue that they are doing enough to provide affordable housing. James Alexander, the Beltline's housing policy and development manager argues, "We've established a program of incentives for builders to build affordable housing."[71] But of course, incentives are not laws, and they lose their power when developers stand to gain financially by not responding to the incentives.

Affluent citizens of Atlanta voice concern about the proliferation of homeless individuals on the Beltline. One businessman located adjacent to the Beltline notes, "we used to worry about homeless people back there and now it's like a boardwalk."[72] In her article on the revitalization efforts for the Historic Fourth Ward Park, Stafford sets the scene for her piece by describing the park as "a barren expanse of cracked concrete," wrapped in kudzu, where "the homeless often find shelter at night out of the scrutiny of public eyes."[73] Alisa Chambers, spokeswoman for the Historic Fourth Ward park effort, notes that "to make the park viable," it must be kept safe, and therefore park authorities should be vigilant about removing the homeless.[74] Yet while the Beltline promises to keep Atlantans "safe" from the homeless, some residents, like neighborhood planning chair Jim Martin, worry about the homeless using unfinished park sites to camp: "The Beltline planners talk about what it will be in 20 years. . . What happens between then and now? . . . it could attract a

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[66]Smith, S. (2013). Biz Voice; Beltline's Value to Atlanta's Economy. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 7 March.
[67]Beltline (2013). Atlanta Beltline, Inc. Board of Directors Adopts Long Range Strategic Implementation Plan. *Atlanta BeltLine* 11 December. www.beltline.org [5 March 2015].
[68]McWhirter, C. (2007). Beltline Property Taxes Afire. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*,
[69]Immergluck, D. (2009). Large Redevelopment Initiatives, Housing Values and Gentrification: The Case of the Atlanta Beltline. *Urban Studies*, *46*(8), 1723-45, at 1743.
[70]McWhirter, C. (2007).
[71]Cauley, H. M. (2014). Beltline Acts as a Magnet. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 19 January.
[72]Brown, R. (2013). Now Atlanta Is Turning Old Tracks Green. *New York Times*, 14 February.
[73]Stafford, L. (2009). Blighted Land Reborn as Beltline's First Park; Project Carries Hope for the Renaissance of a Long-Depressed Area. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 22 August.
[74]Stafford, L. (2009).

lot of homeless people."[75] In fact, a search of both mainstream and progressive media in Atlanta found much concern that homeless people would camp on the Beltline, but little concern for the wellbeing of the homeless individuals themselves. Overall, residents and businesspeople near the Beltline were first and foremost concerned with removing the homeless from areas they wanted to repossess. Homeless individuals were portrayed as a security concern and a nuisance.

In order to displace homeless people, it is useful to criminalize homelessness. In Atlanta, homelessness was criminalized long before the Beltline project. In 1996, Atlanta passed a host of "Quality of Life" ordinances, including a ban on "urban camping," which threatened fines of up to $1000 or one year in prison.[76] Even before anti-camping laws, a desire to keep the homeless out of central business districts was embedded in Atlanta's corporate culture. In the late 1970s, playing off of fears that black homeless men were harassing white women, Dan Sweat, in charge of Central Atlanta Progress (the mouthpiece of corporate interests) convinced Atlanta's police chief to aggressively patrol the streets and remove the homeless.[77]

So at the time that the Beltline was being built, there was already a system in place for penalizing the homeless for spending time in spaces intended for the housed. Initially, the police presence in the Beltline was limited, so there were not enough officers to effectively keep the homeless out. However, in 2013, in response to high-profile robberies on the Beltline, Atlanta Police Chief George Turner and Mayor Reed introduced the Path Force Unit, a police force for the Beltine funded by a $1.8 million federal grant. In the Path Force Unit's first month of patrol, they arrested or cited 60 people.[78] The police presence is so strong that one resident noted that they pass policemen every ten minutes on the Beltline.[79] Although the unit was allegedly put in place to calm fears of robbery and assault, the sixty people cited or arrested had mostly committed quality-of-life crimes "that could deter from the trail's attractiveness."[80] So now even when the "crime wave" of 2013 is forgotten, there will still be a dedicated police force for the Beltline issuing citations to homeless people that "deter from the trail's attractiveness."

In a letter to the journal *Landscape Architecture*, Mark Schisler wrote, "Many like myself would love to live closer to Atlanta and its wonderful eclectic neighborhoods, but schools, crime, and lack of livability keep us from making the move."[81] Schisler then goes on to praise the Beltline as just the sort of project that will make the city "livable." To parse out the meaning of Schisler's letter, we need to first consider the word "livable." Certainly people *live* in Atlanta, so how could it be *unlivable*? Chris Hagerman gives us a critical definition, saying that *livable* is a "very specific and elitist" vision of increased green space at the expense of the displacement of low-income people.[82] For Schisler, the city is perhaps his rightful home, but he cannot take it back until crime is reduced and livability is improved. The Beltline is appealing because it promises to improve both livability and security by providing both green space and a police force. Schisler may have lost the city to the urban poor, but now is his chance to take it back through soft revanchist policies. Schisler's attitude toward downtown Atlanta is the attitude a pioneer has toward the frontier. As an early planning document notes, "Atlanta's Beltline exists as a conspicuous *void* [emphasis added]."[83] Schisler and

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[75]Pendered, D. (2007). Beltline Park Plan a Mystery; Centerpiece: Neighbors of Quarry Site Have Questions. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 5 February.

[76]Cook, R. (1996). 'Camping' Ban Goes into Effect: Homeless Advocates Decry Mayor's Move. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 27 November.

[77]Steffen, C. G. (2012). The Corporate Campaign against Homelessness: Class Power and Urban Governance in Neoliberal Atlanta, 1973-1988. *Journal of Social History*, *46*(1), 170-96, at 177.

[78]Visser, S. (2013). Dedicated Police Unit Targets Beltline Safety. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 26 July.

[79]Visser, S. (2013).

[80]Visser, S. (2013).

[81]Schisler, M. (2009). Urban Sprawl and the Promise of Atlanta's Beltline. *Landscape Architecture*, *99*(7), at 15.

[82]Hagerman, C. (2007). Shaping Neighborhoods and Nature: Urban Political Ecologies of Urban Waterfront Transformations in Portland, Oregon. *Cities*, *24*(4), 285-97, at 285.

[83]Garvin, A., et al. (2004), 6.

other aspiring gentrifiers feel the need to claim this "void" and fill it, unconcerned with the fact that people in fact live adjacent to the "void," and rely on the void to keep property values low. And within the "void" there lives an extremely vulnerable population of homeless people who feel they have no better options.

The irony of the Beltline is that in its pre-2005 state, it was quite sustainable. The sea of kudzu required no maintenance, emitted no pollution, and even provided the ecosystem service of filtering the city air. So how sustainable is this billion-dollar project really? Was it worth leaving a multi-million dollar budget hole in the Atlanta Public School system's budget? The architects of the Beltline almost surely do not have kids in the public school system, since it primarily serves low- and middle-income youth. So who *really* benefits?

Conclusion

When examining the Beltline, we see efforts to improve the quality of life for wealthy citizens without providing any improvements for poor citizens. The Beltline takes tax revenue intended for public schools that serve the urban poor and plows that money back into development projects intended to attract wealthy families and individuals to Atlanta's downtown. In the process, marginalized communities living near the Beltline are displaced as gentrifiers move in. So even as the Beltline ostensibly provides them with better access to green space, that benefit disappears as soon as they are forced out of their homes. Although I could make a moral argument for low-income residents to have the right to stay put, I rely instead on a practical argument: if a park forces residents to move out of their neighborhood into a new neighborhood with fewer parks, the park fails to provide the green space it promised to those residents. But on a more basic level, as Wolch points out, displacement itself and precarious housing status is detrimental to the health of residents.[84] So the right to stay put is not simply a moral argument, it is an argument for basic mental and physical wellbeing.

Like the High Line, the Beltline is a space where the homeless are not welcome. Yet while the High Line utilizes private security to keep out homeless park users, the Beltline uses a special branch of the police department. This is an important shift. Rather than developers hiring private security to protect their park from the aesthetically detrimental presence of the homeless, in the case of the Beltline, the local government secures funding to police the homeless. So the government now overtly works alongside developers to create spaces that act as magnets of gentrification. When political leaders commit to ensuring a smooth road to gentrification, we must question whether they are working on behalf of all their constituents or just the business elites and high-income earners.

Are second wave rail-trails a viable solution for addressing park poverty? Planners are designing second wave rail-trails in areas like downtown Atlanta and New York City that have little green space. They purport to provide green space to urban residents, so in this way they seem like a good solution to the problem of park poverty. Yet are they providing the right type of green space? For residents looking for a place to gather and have a cookout, rail-trails do not provide any suitable space. Furthermore, second wave rail trails are heavily policed, thus they certainly do not serve the winos and homeless people whom Checker's study subjects were concerned about. So second wave rail-trails do not redress park poverty at all for those who most need parks, and yet they cost millions of dollars. Rather than achieve any sort of positive social or environmental goals, both the High Line and Beltline seem primarily committed to creating a certain urban aesthetic and promoting the free flow of commerce. As second wave rail-trails are built in other cities, we must continue assessing whether they actually help communities in need of green space or are simply "sustainability fixes."

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[84]Wolch, J. R., et al. (2014), 235.

I am not arguing that cities should embrace their abandoned rail corridors and preserve them in their unruly states as gathering places for the homeless and disenfranchised. Nor do I argue that these spaces must persist in their unruly states in order to keep property values at reasonable levels. The just green enough approach suggests that there is some middle ground. One possible solution could be simply to return to something more akin to the first wave rail-trail. That is, an unassuming linear park. But rather than suggest that there is a single solution, I argue that we should rethink the processes by which parks are planned. Resident input should be valued most of all, rather than developers' needs or the needs of would-be gentrifiers. The park should *serve* current residents, not force them to move out of the area and again be without green space. Park planners should respond to the desires of current residents. We may find that the people whom these parks are intended to serve—or *should* be intended to serve—know exactly what will serve them best. For this reason, funding structures like the TAD should be avoided, since TADs encourage park planners to answer to developers rather than to residents.

I have also criticized second wave trails for displacing the homeless, but my intention is not to argue that allowing the homeless to live permanently in public space is a viable strategy. Rather, I argue that we must take Dooling's research seriously, especially her observation that homeless persons often see "shelters as spaces of violence and crime...where programs and meals are often linked to a religious agenda that they experience as insulting or alienating."[85] Instead of spending money on deploying police to write citations to homeless park users, cities should consider using those funds to provide services to those homeless park users, services that do not alienate the people they are intended for. Displacing and penalizing homeless and disenfranchised park users should not be viewed as a solution for ending homelessness. It is understandable for residents to be uncomfortable with a homeless person using their recreational space as a home. But in such a situation where homelessness makes park users uncomfortable, this discomfort should spur them to address homelessness in a constructive way, rather than simply displace the problem.

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[85]Dooling, S. (2009), 627.

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