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Hannah Thomas Risman   April 4, 2022

Mortar and Myth: Progress, Memory, and the Chattahoochee Brick Company

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Philosophy, Politics, and Law

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Abstract

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In the heart of the Deep South lies the enigmatic Atlanta: the 'City Too Busy to Hate.' Popular narrativization of Atlanta's history presents the city as an emblem of racial progress. However, the urban landscape of Atlanta, a palimpsest so convoluted that it is nearly illegible, presents a forgotten counter-narrative to this sanitized history. Underneath the haze of 'post-racial' narratives, forgotten truths reside in plain view, found within the ubiquitous red brick that lines Atlanta. Just nine miles northwest of Atlanta proper, stands the Chattahoochee Brick Company brickworks, the site of one of the largest and arguably most abusive contractors of the convict leasing system. At the brickyards, freedmen and women were transformed into commodities and corpses. To sidestep state-enforced penalties for abuse, the deceased laborers were thrown into the brick kilns, indicating that all CBC bricks produced during the tenure of convict leasing contain traces of those forced to make them. This forgotten history gives new meaning to the 'blood-red brick' that saturates the city, a silent reminder of a history dictated by the 'what's good for business is good for Atlanta.' *Mortar and Myth* explores the history and lasting materialism of the Chattahoochee brick, a product of white supremacy and Southern industrialism. I argue that the forgotten history of the Chattahoochee brick reveals a historical continuity of racial violence and exploitation in Atlanta. This material archive of Black death that permeates the 'City Too Busy To Hate' serves as a material contradiction to the New South myth of progress. Employing Saidiya Hartman's "history of the present," I interpret the genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick through an action-oriented lens, uncovering the New South myth's function to occlude the Black counter-memory and obstruct calls for reparations and commemorative justice. By bearing witness to the "terrain of forgotten pain" that constitutes the American landscape, our relationship with the past becomes more personal, laying bare the vestiges of past vice that still survive today.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I have to thank my phenomenal thesis advisor, Dr. Calvin Warren, who, despite not knowing each other before this process, dove headfirst with me into this project. I cannot express how grateful I am to have had an advisor as passionate and committed to this project as I am. This paper would never have been accomplished without his dedicated involvement in every step throughout the research and writing process.

I would also like to show gratitude to my brilliant committee, including Dr. Carol Anderson, Dr. Dilek Huseyinzadegan, and Dr. Yancy. The important historical work conducted by Dr. Anderson largely influenced my approach to this project. Even though I have not had the opportunity to work with Dr. Yancy or Dr. Huseyinzadegan, previously, the impact of their work on my own research is evident throughout this thesis. Despite their busy schedules and endless responsibilities, I greatly appreciate their willingness to serve on my committee and their enthusiasm for my project.

I would also like to express my profound gratitude to the Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry, which sponsored and supported my research through the Undergraduate Honors Fellowship. Thank you to our program directors, Dr. Walter Melion and Mr. Keith Anthony, as well as my fellowship cohort, who offered valuable resources and precious commentary.

I am also indebted to my family at Georgia STAND-UP for offering constant encouragement and accommodating to my non-linear writing process. I would like to specifically recognize my supervisors, Mrs. Deborah Scott and Mrs. Sonjuia Robinson, who were incredibly understanding and flexible when I needed to take a leave from work in the last month of writing. I am profoundly thankful for Mrs. Scott, who was the first person who encouraged me to write this thesis and introduced me to a network of activists and researchers conducting on-the-ground work surrounding the Chattahoochee Brick Company and reparations.

Finishing my thesis required more than academic and professional support, and I have many people to thank for listening to and tolerating my incessant – and often, unsolicited – blabbering about bricks. I cannot begin to express my appreciation and gratitude for their friendship. Maya Ochoa, Jake Moore, Jerald Gonzalez, Julie Kim, Jordan Hasty, Mackenzie White, Anna Rittenhouse, and Bryn Walker have been unwavering in their personal and professional support. I am so lucky to have the honor of being their friend, and I look forward to the day I can repay them for the steadfast support offered in my darkest moments and longest nights.

Most importantly, none of this would have been possible without my family. To my mom, who offered her encouragement a thousand miles away through phone calls, text messages, and late-night revisions. To my dad, who inspired my love and appreciation for history. To my brother, Chase, who taught me to pursue my passions unapologetically. And lastly, to my sister, Becca, a force of nature who inspires me every day to live up to my legacy as a Ris-Woman. This thesis stands as a testament to your unconditional love and support.

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Introduction

At the intersection of Boulevard and Memorial Drive, stands Oakland Cemetery, one of the oldest historical plots in Atlanta. Purchased as a modest six-acre plot in 1850, Oakland Cemetery is Atlanta's oldest public park and the burial site of the city's most notable figures. The grounds were later expanded in 1867 to the present-day size of 48-acres. Hills, shaded by lush magnolia trees, span the park all the way from the Bell Tower ridge where Atlanta's White elite are buried under elaborate mausoleums and family plots to the segregated eastern section formerly called the "Slave Square."[1] In the middle of the cemetery, all pathways lead to the large stone spire memorial honoring the Confederate dead. The 48 acres are enclosed by a foot-thick wall of red brick, with two elaborate gates welcoming visitors to pay their respects.

It is ironic that the very bricks that surround the cemetery are themselves a final resting place for the laborers forced to make them. In 1896, construction of the wall and the Hunter Street and Fair Street gates were completed using brick supplied by the Chattahoochee Brick Company, infamous for its exploitation of the convict leasing system.[2] Following the 'abolition' of slavery, the Southern prison system transformed into the next custodian of white supremacy, re-enslaving and selling freedmen and women to the highest bidder. The Chattahoochee Brick Company was one of the largest–and most abusive–contractors of convict labor in the South. According to an oral history conducted by Richard Becherer and Dennis Stewart with the descendants of convict laborers, the Chattahoochee Brick Company would relieve itself from the burdens of guilt, proper burial, and legal repercussions. Incinerating any evidence of wrongdoing

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[1] Historic Oakland Foundation, "Character Areas and Landmarks," *Oakland Cemetery*, March 14, 2022. https://oaklandcemetery.com/character-areas-and-landmarks/.
[2] Sara Van Beck, "Oakland Cemetery's Early Landscapes: The Fence and the Wall," *Oakland Cemetery*, Historic Oakland Foundation, July 15, 2020. https://oaklandcemetery.com/early-landscapes-the-fence-and-the-wall/.

on the company's part, bodies of deceased convicts were thrown into the brick kilns.[3] This evidence still exists within the brick's material, containing traces of the bones, ashes, and DNA of predominantly Black convict laborers. Within every brick that fortifies the walls of the original City Cemetery lay the ashes of these laborers, un-memorialized, in their final resting place.

Cemeteries signify class beyond death, and Oakland Cemetery is no exception. As you walk across the grounds, the class divisions become obvious, comparing the modest 'Pauper Grounds' to the grandiose mausoleums adorned with rich architectural details and perfectly manicured plots of the Bell Tower sector. Within the Bell Tower ridge, a monument stands honoring the mayors of Atlanta, twenty-seven of whom are buried there. Among the twenty-seven buried in segregated Bell Tower ridge is 'Captain' James W. English, one-time mayor of Atlanta and president of the Chattahoochee Brick Company. As one of the most powerful men of the Southern Gilded Age and the city-building movement of the New South, it is not surprising that English chose Oakland Cemetery as his final resting place. With English's bricks encompassing his resting place, the reality of the black body forced to protect the institution of white supremacy, even in death, becomes all too clear.

These bricks serve as a barrier between the living and the dead, protecting the latter from the elements and unwanted visitors. Interestingly enough, these bricks are located outside the confines of life and death, stuck in a limbo, demarcating a site of what Christina Sharpe calls "living in the wake."[4] While the bodies that occupy the bricks are obviously no longer alive, the life of these bricks spans far past the mortal confines of the body. These bricks are a product of the convict leasing system, a later evolution of the Southern slave society, a system that

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[3] Dorothy Roper and Bryan Roper, interview by Richard Becherer and Dennis Stewart, Atlanta Storybooth, April 9, 2011, interview ATL000809, https://archive.storycorps.org/interviews/atl000809/.
[4] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 9.

continues to live and shape society today through the contemporary prison industrial complex. How can one memorialize a past that is not the past but continues to thrive today? These bricks signify the continuing legacy of racial exploitation and violence that built Atlanta as the capital of the progressive New South.

Mortar and Myth explores the history and lasting materialism of the Chattahoochee brick, a product of white supremacy and Southern industrialism, and its function as a mythic contradiction to the New South myth of progress which today prevails in the historical narrative and contemporary identity of Atlanta. The scope of my historical analysis is limited to the state of Georgia but focuses primarily on Atlanta during the Gilded Age. I analyze this history through a framework posed by Saidiya Hartman called the "history of the present," which seeks to locate how systems and events of the past continue to live with us today.

Throughout my argument, I closely analyze historical sites of 'progress' from a critical perspective, underlining its function to distort the past and invent the future. Within the legal framework of American liberalism, the responsibility of the government to steer social progress is limited to formal equality, which confers equal status among citizens in the court of law. However, as Marx argues in *The German Ideology*, formal equality does not necessarily generate actual equality. "As Christians are equal in heaven but not on earth," Marx notes, "so workers are equal to the middle classes in the heaven of legal definitions, but not equal in actual relations of economic and social forms."[5] Despite extensive legislative action to confer and establish protections for racial equality, marginalized communities have been exploited and neglected for the profit and prosperity of the White elite. Given the proximity of New South businessmen to political and legal institutions, the content and consequences of policy and legislation heralded as 'progressive' must be questioned and analyzed through the capitalist formula of "private vices,

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[5]Karl Marx, *The German Ideology, Parts I & III*, (International publishers, 1944).

public virtues." Hidden within these watershed moments of formal equality, such as the Thirteenth Amendment or the abolition of the convict lease system, lie the very instruments ensuring the survival of racial subjugation and inequality.

Considering the insidious evolution of slavery in the New South, which operated within and through the law, this genealogy presents a challenge to the popular understanding of the law as an instrument of justice. As demonstrated above, the law, instead, often acts as an instrument of oppression and domination, privileging the life, liberty, and customs of White elites above—and at the cost of—all others. The disparate impact of formal equality among the races calls into question the credibility of the law as 'objective' and 'rational.' Disguised under the auspices of 'race-neutrality,' as the genealogy reveals, the law is anything but neutral and fair. In fact, the law's image of impartiality serves to provide an air of authority to the prejudiced interests of the White elite. In effect, the portrait of the law as objective and nondiscriminatory discourages collective resistance, serving a dual function of legitimating inequality and obstructing opposition.

The prevalence of racial inequality and exploitation is not a symptom of a 'broken' system but rather is the result of a system working exactly how it was engineered to. In a technical sense, the 'justice' system that hunted and enslaved African Americans functioned perfectly according to the law, with every abuse of power justified within the legal system. As C. Vann Woodward argues in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, the survival of the racial caste system in the United States was not inevitable. Instead, the historical abuse of political, legal, and social institutions fortified a perfectly-legal and morally-neutral system of white supremacy, sure to include the necessary tools of its continuing existence in every iteration of its praised abolition. In this sense, formal equality serves as a double-edged sword, institutionalizing the

subsequent evolution of white supremacy in its promise of liberation and civil rights. The gaping ravine between formal and actual equality further challenges the integrity of social 'progress' enacted and celebrated by the New South order.

Although the historical analysis of the Southern convict leasing system is well documented, the scope of existing research is fairly broad, often conducting either a regional or state analysis. The history of the Chattahoochee Brick Company is often limited to just a few pages in a book, which is vastly disproportionate to the company's influence in the historical and contemporary contexts. The only published research specifically focused on the Chattahoochee Brick Company is David Berry's 1991 dissertation *Free Labor He Found Unsatisfactory: James W. English and Convict Lease Labor at the Chattahoochee Brick Company* and Richard Becherer's article "Bricks and Bones: Discovering Atlanta's Forgotten Spaces of Neo-Slavery." My research expands upon the historical foundation laid by these scholars and conducts a philosophical analysis in the context of the New South myth.

My thesis expands upon the theoretical contributions of C. Vann Woodward's trailblazing book *Origins of the New South*, which presented a revisionist history of the New South. Critically evaluating the motivations and consequences of the campaign, Woodward powerfully deflates the romanticized historical interpretations of the New South. Woodward's pioneering contribution to the study of the New South established a new hermeneutical paradigm, inspiring a stream of critical studies of the contemporary South. Among these studies was Paul Gaston's book, *The New South Creed*, which was highly influential in the construction of my argument. Gaston utilizes historical and literary sources to reveal the function of the New South as a powerful myth. Drawing upon Woodward's and Gaston's analyses of the New South, I employ

Roland Barthes' analytic framework detailed in his book *Mythologies* to deconstruct the function and effects of the myth on the materiality of the Chattahoochee brick.

Fusing the disciplines of history, philosophy, and African-American Studies, *Mortar and Myth* addresses a gap in the literature on the convict leasing system and the New South. By taking a philosophical approach to public history, my thesis contributes to a field of study dominated by the historical discipline. My thesis uniquely explores the history and legacy of the Chattahoochee Brick Company and the New South campaign, analyzing the contemporary mythic implications in the public memory and built environment of Atlanta.

Mortar and Myth draws from a vast array of historical, philosophical, and literary sources, which, when placed in conjunction, tells a story not only of the history of the New South Atlanta but also of the role of power in historical storytelling. The historical documents and secondary sources that I draw from not only recount the history of an event but also point to the historical silence (and silencing) of the black counter-memory.

Given that the historical record is incomplete and prejudiced toward the dominant White narrative, a mere historical account of the Chattahoochee Brick Company cannot sufficiently explain the discursive nature of the bricks as a material archive of racial violence. This is why I chose to conduct a genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick rather than a traditional history. A traditional historical view begins its inquiry with a search for 'origins,' attempting to craft a narrative of change and continuity from an amalgam of events and historical attitudes. However, as Michel Foucault notes, truth is inextricably bound to power, a relationship whose significance derives not from the historical origins but from its products, discontinuities, and 'mistakes.'

In order to properly account for the various forces that produce the Chattahoochee brick as a site of embedded knowledge, I conducted a genealogy of the brick, drawing inspiration from

the theoretical contributions of philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. First developed by Nietzsche and later expanded upon by Foucault, a genealogy explores the diverse, shifting, and sometimes conflicting forces that produce a system of thought, a movement, a moment—a brick. A genealogy does not seek to capture a linear construction of the past. Instead, it aims to decipher historical discontinuities, contingencies, and "accidents" of the external world rather than fixed origins or rational trends.[6]

The brick exists within and outside of the realm of history. The brick is both material, a tangible product of early Southern industrialism, and abstract, a symbol representing competing narratives of New South progress and neo-slavery. The Chattahoochee brick functions as the very presence of this tension between the material and the abstract. History tells the story of the material, semiology explains the infusion of the myth into the material, and genealogy brings the two together, locating the brick as a material archive, a site of embedded knowledge.

A genealogy is a worthwhile and particularly apt instrument to expose this dissonance between sites of publicized and actual progress. Whereas a traditional history would cite the official abolition of the convict lease system in Georgia in 1909, a genealogy would not go as far to suggest a definite termination of the system. Beginning with the asterisks of history, a genealogy reveals that, despite the evolving structure of the penal economy, its principal function as a custodian of white supremacy prevails in its subsequent interaction of the chain gang system. In fact, as Michelle Alexander argues in her book *The New Jim Crow*, the institutionalization of white supremacy prevails today through mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex. According to a report conducted by the Vera Institute in 2019, Black people comprised 60% of the prison population in Georgia, despite only constituting 32% of the state's

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[6] *Ibid.*

residents.[7] Mass incarceration today not only functions as a guardian of the racial caste system but also as a market for free labor. Just like Georgia convict laborers before 1909, the prison population today performs work for the state and private interests with no pay.[8] Although the state now houses and assumes responsibility for the convict population, the penal system continues to serve the interests of White capitalists, enslaving the poor Black population and exploiting their productive abilities for profit.

Accordingly, a genealogy would not erroneously locate 1909 as the end of the convict lease system in Georgia but rather suggest that, despite formal abolition, the system simply evolved and continues to thrive today. Therefore, the genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick exposes not only its forgotten meaning as an archive of racial exploitation but also points to our existence "living in the wake" of slavery. It reveals that despite the century of 'progress' separating the New South convict laborers and residents today, the prison system serves the same function: to profit from the subjugation and exploitation of the Black community.

The genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick is a valuable resource not only for historians and residents of Atlanta but also for anyone living in the wake, where everyday materials have dark, forgotten histories. The Chattahoochee brick is simply a case study for contemporary mythic contradiction, and the analytic framework can be employed to study the meaning of taken-for-granted materials and public sites across the United States. These archives of racial violence and exploitation are not unique to Chattahoochee brick or even Atlanta, but they can be

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[7] Christian Henrichson et al., "Incarceration Trends in Georgia," Vera Institute, 2019.
https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-georgia.pdf

[8] Georgia is among the few states that refuse to pay for the labor of convicts in regular (non-industry) and agency-operated industry jobs. For more information, see: Adam Crisp, "Georgia inmates strike in fight for pay," *Times Free Press*, December 14, 2010,
http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/news/story/2010/dec/14/georgia-inmates-strike-in-fight-for-pay/36956/; and Bill Torpy, "Ga. Inmates' 'free' work has a price," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 20, 2011 (reposted at Human Rights Defense Center),
https://www.humanrightsdefensecenter.org/action/news/2011/pln-editor-quoted-in-article-on-prison-labor-in-georgia/.

found in cities and landmarks across America. From "sea to shining sea,"[9] the public and memorial landscape are inscribed with death, exploitation, and dispossession, values antithetical to American promises of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Accordingly, this project serves as a theoretical invitation among scholars and public historians to engage critically with the built environment, with the materials that are often overlooked when conducting histories. The genealogy of Chattahoochee brick serves as evidence that these neglected materials hold the key to denaturalizing the dominant myths which construct our contemporary identity and relationship with the memorial landscape, such as our association with nationalism, individualism, and capitalism.

Mortar and Myth combines historical and semiological analyses of the convict leasing system in the New South to trace historical relevance to contemporary understandings of Atlanta's identity and questions of justice. My research draws on memory studies, particularly analyses of the politics of memory, the Southern memorial landscape, and the relationship between public memory, identity, and political agency. Employing Hartman's "history of the present," I interpret the genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick through an action-oriented lens, uncovering the New South myth's function to occlude the Black counter-memory and obstruct calls for reparations and commemorative justice.

Accordingly, this research finds social and practical relevance in the context of advocacy and identity construction in Atlanta. Presenting the necessary instruments to deconstruct and denaturalize the myth of progress from Atlanta's historical and contemporary identity, my thesis serves as a call to action for commemorative justice. The residents of Atlanta are the intended audience of my research, but I present a theoretical invitation for scholars and public historians

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[9] William Arms Fisher and Katharine Lee Bates, "America the Beautiful," Oliver Ditson Company, Boston, MA, 1917, notated Music. https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010520/.

to engage in a similar mythic genealogy of materials often overlooked and taken-for-granted in histories.

These lost histories contribute to the "incomplete project of freedom," piecing together clues into the memories neglected by the traditional historical discipline. Although we can never construct a complete historical record, especially of the experiences of the historically marginalized, similar genealogical contributions help to bring these lost voices to the forefront of public discourse. By bearing witness to the "terrain of forgotten pain" that constitutes the American landscape, our relationship with the past becomes more personal, laying bare the vestiges of past vice that survive today.

In my first chapter, "The Origins of the Mythic New South," I lay out the structure as well as the manifest and latent functions of the New South campaign, which I argue is the catalyst of the myth of progress. The myth of progress is what molds the perception of identity and the interactions Atlantans have with the built environment today. Contrasting the New South campaign's promises of widespread economic prosperity and racial progress with evidence of its regressive implications for low-income Black communities, I expose the function of the campaign as a pervasive myth. I present the myth as a framework that distorts the public memory of Atlantans, ultimately advancing the events of progress that support the myth's credibility.

In the following chapter, I explore the history of the Chattahoochee Brick Company as a case study of mythic contradiction. Throughout this chapter, I conduct a genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick, tracing the history of the convict leasing system and the legal apparati modified to normalize the practice as 'progressive.' I delve into the cruel and regressive practices of the Chattahoochee Brick Company, exposing a scarcely-known history of the "Black Mecca." Resisting the tendencies of the traditional historical discipline to begin inquiry at the 'origins,'

the genealogy of the Chattahoochee Brick begins with what Saidiya Hartman calls the "asterisks" of the grand historical narratives.[10] By starting with the "asterisks," the mistakes and contingencies which fail to fit within the neat narrative of progress, I expose a historical continuity contradictory to popular understandings of Atlanta. The Chattahoochee brick which still stands throughout the 'City Too Busy to Hate' is the very presence of this continuity of racial violence and exploitation, serving as a material contradiction to the New South myth of progress.

In my final chapter, "Commemorative Justice 'In the Wake' of the New South," I grapple with how to develop a path towards justice and reparations for the victims of the Chattahoochee Brick Company as well as the residents who interact with what I call the material archive of racial violence throughout the city. Analyzing the relationship between the New South myth and the public amnesia surrounding the history and meaning of the Chattahoochee brick, I propose that commemorative justice must begin by breaking the myth, denaturalizing its presence in history and contemporaneously.

Ultimately, *Mortar and Myth* serves as a call to action to listen to the silences of history and how they play out in the built environment that we interact with every day. I present the genealogy of Chattahoochee brick as an instrument of mythical denaturalization, as the key to allow the voices and bodies neglected by history to tell their stories and find rest in the wake. By understanding how our past influences the present, we, as residents of Atlanta, are empowered to become political agents who can shape the future of commemorative justice and fight for an Atlanta that is true to its reputation as the "Black Mecca."

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[10] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008), 2.

Chapter 1

The Origins of the Mythic New South

> From the ashes [Sherman] left us in 1864 we have raised a brave
> and beautiful city; that somehow or other we have caught the
> sunshine in the bricks and mortar of our homes, and have builded
> therein not one ignoble prejudice or memory. - Henry Grady[11]
>
> They want the New South and the Old Negro. - Ray Stannard
> Baker[12]

How did Atlanta, the young city of the Confederacy, suddenly transform its reputation as the progressive hub of the South? For those familiar with the 'Gate City,' Atlanta's history and spirit are marked by the supposed achievement of an impossible feat: racial progress and harmony in the postwar South. As dominant local histories attest, the Atlanta of the New South accomplished this feat by putting "business above politics" and developing a business-friendly environment to ensure mutual economic growth.[13] Yet, despite its nickname as the 'City Too Busy to Hate,' Atlanta was no stranger to racial inequality and violence, albeit, much better at disguising discriminatory motivations and implications than its neighboring cities in the South.[14] In fact, when exploring sites of social regress, the logic of what Southern historian Paul Gaston calls the "New South Creed" crumbles, revealing the city's reputation of social progress as a smokescreen for capital and racial subjugation.

This myth of widespread social and economic progress promised by the New South campaign finds its origins in Enlightenment philosophy. The work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

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[11] Henry W. Grady. *The New South: Writings and Speeches of Henry Grady* (Savannah, GA: Beehive Press, 1971), 7-8.

[12] Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line: an Account of Negro Citizenship In the American Democracy* (Doubleday, Page, William S. Hein, 1908), 44.

[13] Joel Chandler Harris, ed., *Life of Henry W. Grady, Including His Writings and Speeches* (New York: 1890), 87-88.

[14] Atlanta's progressive nickname was coined by former mayor Willaim Berry Hartsfield.

Hegel was largely influential in the Western obsession with progress. Hegel argued that progress played an indispensable role in the attainment of History's ultimate goal of freedom. History, for Hegel, serves not as an indicator of time but of progress, ultimately culminating in the achievement of the predestined goal of absolute freedom. Hegel's teleological account of History ignores instances of regress, which are mere 'mistakes' in the assured path toward development.[15] In his book, *The Myth of Inevitable Progress,* Franco Ferrarotti critiques the myth notion of progress emanating from the Age of Enlightenment. Ferrarotti defines this concept as:

> A theory which implies a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future, that it is based on an interpretation of history in which society slowly but ineluctably progresses in a desirable direction, and that this progress will continue indefinitely. It also implies that everybody will enjoy a condition of general happiness which will justify the while of the process of civilization…[16]

The concept of progress that dominated 18th and 19th century thought was considered "continuous and irreversible,"[17] establishing a widespread conviction that the inevitability of progress and development "constitute intrinsic and necessary laws of human society which it would be useless to question too severely."[18] Posing the promises of the future as evidence for the necessary connection between progress and History, Hegelian thought largely influenced the New South campaign and its moral emancipation from the past.

Following defeat of the Civil War, rather than pursuing a total restructuring of the social and political norms that governed the Southern slave society, the architects of the New South myth distorted these traditional practices under the auspices of business progressivism and city boosterism. However, if you look past the myth's historical reinterpretation, a new history of

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[15] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The Philosophy of History," (*Kitchener: Batoche,* 2001).
[16] Franco Ferrarotti, *The Myth of Inevitable Progress*. Greenwood Press, 1985, 22.
[17] *Id.*, 3.
[18] *Id.*, 7.

Atlanta emerges, one characterized by a continuity of racial violence and exploitation rather than of social and economic progress.

The origin of Atlanta's tenacious campaign for progress begins with a tale of defeat. In early May of 1864, Union forces surrounded Atlanta, which took over the task of supplying military cargo to the Confederate army after Nashville was conquered.[19] Under Sherman's orders, Union troops ruthlessly shelled the city, indiscriminately destroying military fortifications, cargo transport lines, and Atlanta's interior. This systematic incineration of all that characterized life in Dixie's Atlanta was purposeful: Sherman was keen to make personal the damage incurred across the nation during the war. For forty-two days, Atlanta crumbled as General Sherman ensured that both, "old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war," leaving an estimated four to five thousand buildings in charred ruin, sparing only four hundred buildings.[20]

When the evacuated residents returned to find their homes reduced to soot, it was clear that there was no other path to follow other than forward. This "baptism of fire"[21] would come to define the future history of Atlanta, a city reborn to rise "Phoenix-like from the ashes."[22] With Atlanta's scorched landscape as a perfect metaphor for the "death" of the Old South, Sherman's march was a necessary catalyst for the New South movement. From humble beginnings, Atlanta

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[19] Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 31-2.
[20] William Sherman, *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865*, eds. Jean V. Berlin and Brooks D. Simpson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 775-777.
[21] Thomas Martin, *Hand Book of the City of Atlanta: A Comprehensive Review of the City's Commercial, Industrial and Residential Conditions* (Atlanta, 1898), 3, https://archive.org/details/handbookofcityof00mart.
[22] Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 32.

would soon rise as the prized "Jewel of the New South,"[23] a "city of the new regime, erected on the ruins of the old."[24]

However, this path forward was no simple task. Immobilized by war-torn infrastructure and severe economic disruption during the war, the widespread poverty and stunted industry led many reporters to christen Dixieland as "the Prostrate South."[25] When the Confederacy finally admitted defeat and surrendered to the Union, the South was forced to reckon with the changing conditions of its political economy, which relied on forced Black labor. The abolition of slavery led to not only the loss of the primary source of capital in the antebellum South but also challenged the structure of white supremacy. In a time of utter defeat, destruction, and humiliation, the New South campaign promised prosperity, development, and regional pride "without the sacrifice of racial, political, and cultural continuity."[26]

The New South campaign quickly rose to popularity in 1880, following the end of Reconstruction. After 12 years of Northern imperial rule, the New South campaign promised what so many southerners desired: a future of Southern pride and prosperity so that "no son of hers will have reason to be ashamed of her place in the picture."[27] Engineered to guide the South out of debilitating poverty through mass industrialization, the New South architects faced one small issue in the enactment of their promise; in order to fund the very expensive task of city and industry building, they needed Northern investment. This caveat challenged the campaign on two fronts: one from Northern investors skeptical of the South's commitment to sectional

[23] "The Condition of Things in Atlanta," *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, Report from Peoria (Ill.) Democrat, May 20, 1867, https://cincinnati.newspapers.com/image/32010708/. See also *Atlanta Constitution*, April 15, 1869.

[24] Martin, *Hand Book of the City of Atlanta*, 3.

[25] Paul Gaston. *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York, NY: A. A. Knopf, 1970), 45.

[26] James Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity In the Modern South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 150.

[27] J. D. B. DeBow, "The Future of the South," *DeBow's Review*, no. 1 (January 1866), 8-14.

reconciliation and to resolving what was commonly regarded as the 'Negro question;' the other from White southerners embittered by the humiliating experience of Reconstruction. Resolution on either front seemingly obstructed the resolution of the other. It was only the creation and proliferation of the mythic Southern identity that reconciled the opposing interests of both wealthy Northerners and poor, White Southerners.

Fortunately for them, the advocates of the New South knew how to play all sides. Their solution for reviving the postbellum South had three manifest functions: rebuild the economy, reconcile sectional relations, and assuage the worries of Northerners. First, it sought to revitalize the postwar economy and infrastructure through mass industrialization, introducing Atlanta as an epicenter of commercial industry. The promise of material wealth, economic independence, and widespread employment found mass appeal, both among Southerners suffering mass joblessness and poverty and Northerners anxious to profit from the industrial potential of the largely undeveloped land. However, the material blessings of the New South only graced those pulling the strings. While the wealthy elite got wealthier, the majority of Southerners, Black and White, never enjoyed the same profits.[28]

Second, the New South movement served to reconcile the sectional relations after the war. Still reeling from the embarrassing defeat and subsequent political control by the North, the architects of the New South campaign understood that post-Reconstruction was a critical period to redefine the new Southern identity as well as the future of sectional relations. To assure Northern investors of the South's commitment to national unity and cooperation, the New South leaders worked to eschew all negative connotations connected to the Old South in their image of

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[28] Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 87.

the New. In fact, they went as far as to declare that "The Old South is dead. It has passed away; it is buried; it is forgotten."[29]

However, in addressing the concerns of white Southerners, the leaders of the New South had to be careful that the campaign did not admonish the Confederate cause and antebellum tradition. Instead, they crafted a sanguine picture of the antebellum life, an era of Southern tradition and gentility, in which the brave Confederate soldiers were to be forever venerated, even if their efforts were misguided. The New South Creed was the tombstone that stood over the grave of the Old South, marking its death with a reverent memorial. With the Old South "buried" and "forgotten," the Southern identity was reborn in the light and ideals of the New South. The 'Atlanta spirit,' which the *Atlanta Constitution* defined as, "only the militant expression of Atlanta's personality—forceful, aggressive, intelligent, harmonious, with an abundance of that requisite indispensable in man or city—sleepless initiative," would lift the city from defeat to new heights of prosperity.[30]

Finally, the New South Creed served to assuage the worries of Northern 'humanitarians' who were wary of the Southern treatment of the 'Negro question.' The campaign's boosters recognized that racial harmony, or at least the illusion of it, ensured an attractive environment for Northern investment. Marketing the New South as the best custodian of its internal race relations simultaneously relieved Southern anxieties of Reconstruction's return and Northern worries of slavery's return. In 1886, Henry W. Grady, the famed editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* who soon came to be known as the spokesman of the New South, sealed the deal when he delivered his famed "New South" address to a crowd of prospective Northern investors at Delmonico's, one of

[29] Alexander McClure, *The South: Its Industrial, Financial, and Political Condition* (Philadelphia, 1886), 31, https://archive.org/details/southitsindustri00mccluoft.
[30] *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 3, 1905, https://www.proquest.com/hnpatlantaconstitution2/docview/495964732.

the first elite clubs in New York City. Grady assured Northern tycoons that, "No section shows a more prosperous laboring population than the negroes of the South, none in fuller sympathy with the employing and land-owning class."[31] According to the New South ideal, the future of the South would be guided by progressivism and modern industrialism, rather than the social and economic 'backwardness' of the antebellum era. Eager to also profit from the South's industrialization, it did not require much convincing for Northern investors to sign on to the project of rebuilding the New South.

It is crucial to note that just like their elite Southern counterparts, the 'humanitarian' concerns of Northern investors did not exclusively arise from a genuine desire for social equality but, in large part, in pursuit of a secure investment climate. The evolution of slavery to the convict lease system, which accommodated modern capitalism rather than the traditional slave society, was sufficient enough to satisfy Northerern 'progressives,' especially if they were the ones to profit from it. Thus, racial 'progress' was a necessary component of the New South Creed, but only as a means to increased shareholder profits.

With the acquisition of Northern private investment and popular support back home, the elites orchestrating the New South movement began the grand capitalist enterprise of rebuilding Atlanta and its industries according to the desires of powerful elites. In the words of Mark Twain, the future of the New South lay in the hands of "brisk men, energetic of movement and speech: the dollar their god, how to get it their religion."[32] Among the ranks of Atlanta's city-builders were New South industrialists, banks, railroads, and modern capitalist "labor lords," who specialized in the commodification and exploitation of convict labor.[33]

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[31] Grady, *The New South*, 9.
[32] Mark Twain, *Life On the Mississippi* (London, UK: Chatto & Windus, 1887), 417, https://archive.org/details/LifeOnTheMississippi1883MarkTwain.
[33] Alexander Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: the Political Economy of Convict Labor In the New South* (New York, NY: Verso, 1996), 9.

Establishing what Southern historian Edward L. Ayers termed a "mutual-aid society," these elite businessmen championed joint ventures between local and state government and private investment, reimagining the role of the government as a Whiggish instrument of economic development.[34] The distinction between public servants and private industrialists began to collapse within itself, as the roles of members overlapped, serving both political and corporate positions, either as directors of industrial firms or their shareholders. This mutual-aid society additionally enlisted the aid of media editors and propagandists, most notably Henry W. Grady of the *Atlanta Constitution*, to steer public opinion favorable or profitable to the industry magnates invested in the city-building process. True to the New South spirit, the glue that held this public-private constituency together was profit, as the success of Atlanta was inextricably tied to the growth of industrial and commercial enterprises and vice-versa. This union between city boosterism and business progressivism proved persistent, and soon became the "norm of Southern statecraft in the decades that followed."[35]

It is from within this omnipotent mutual-aid society in which the ruling class of the New South originates. Such men, the *Constitution* wrote in 1877, were "representative of the later and better Atlanta—the solid, respectable, prosperous, rich Atlanta, that succeeded the … chaotic, reckless city that was built upon the ashes that was sprinkled from the torches of Sherman's bummers."[36] However, this romanticized perspective of public-private collusion did not enjoy universal support. William Harrell Felton, an outspoken critic of Atlanta's corrupt network of

[34] Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1984), 195.
[35] George Tindall, "Business Progressivism: Southern Politics in the Twenties," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, no. 62 (Winter 1963), 96, https://www.proquest.com/docview/59200648.
[36] *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 26, 1877, https://www.proquest.com/docview/494654884.

business and political elite, bitterly remarked that "a button pushed in Atlanta moved another small wheel in nearly every courthouse in Georgia."[37]

In fact, Felton was not far off. With every sector of influence at their fingertips, under the seemingly innocuous motivation to make Atlanta "business-friendly," political and business elites collaborated to deregulate the market and restructure the penal system to serve their economic interests. They did so by championing a laissez-faire approach to the market, manipulating state policies and municipal contracts to increase profits, and engineering a penal economy to supply a near-unlimited supply of cheap labor. True to the New South progressive agenda, even the convict lease system was introduced as a humanitarian reform, serving to clean up the streets of crime and offering social and moral rehabilitation under the custody of white supremacy. These politicians who developed the highly profitable penal economy and implemented "pro-business" policies were often shareholders and board members of the companies directly benefiting from their positions of power. In the words of Reverend John C. Calhoun, with the New South lust for material progress as their gospel, "wealthy capitalists, and prince merchants, and lordly bankers," paraded as the "stewards of God."[38]

Among these holy stewards of New South progress was the Chattahoochee Brick Company President and one-term mayor James W. English, who was championed by the *Atlanta Centennial Yearbook* as "a financial genius and a leader in all lines of humanitarian endeavor."[39] 'Captain' English is the perfect example of the New South businessman, the grand puppeteer of government and media, pulling strings for personal profit. English, one of Georgia's largest labor lords in the Gilded Age, helped to coordinate widespread collusion between sheriffs, judges, and

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[37] Rebecca Felton, *My Memoirs of Georgia Politics* (Atlanta, GA: self-pub., 1911), 7, https://archive.org/details/mymemoirsofgeorg00felto.
[38] Gaston, *The New South Creed*, 112.
[39] *Atlanta Centennial Yearbook 1837-1937* (Atlanta: 1937), 102.

labor agents employed by industry giants to charge and incarcerate Black men. This network served a double function: to provide an inexpensive, seemingly endless supply of reliable labor while serving as a guardian of white supremacy. Stripping the recently-endowed freedom from formerly-enslaved people, this network solved the post-war labor shortage, exploiting the labor power of Black men and women to fuel the unbridled industrialization and exponential capital of the companies they were invested in. This unregulated manipulation of the juridical system for personal profit further supports Alexander Lichenstein's argument in his book *Twice the Work of Free Labor* that the convict leasing system was neither a moral flaw of the New South nor a mere aberration in "an otherwise slow but healthy march toward progress," but rather, its foundational principle.[40] The structure and function of the penal labor system was an inherent and integral force of Southern modernization and progress.

Despite the New South's promise of racial progress and mutual economic prosperity, it is clear that the campaign instead functioned to disguise the evolved system of forced Black labor under the auspices of material growth and social progressivism. Although the architects of the campaign denounced the horrors of slavery in their idyllic image of the New South, the progressive rhetoric of the campaign, and the corporatocracy it inspired, worked conjointly to maintain the institution of white supremacy in the new era of modern capitalism. The New South campaign fetishized economic development as a cure to the racial inequality and discord that had long plagued the South. Rejecting the barbaric nature of slavery, the leaders of the New South constructed a 'race-neutral,' but racially contingent, replacement. Ensconced in the authority of the law, forced black labor was suddenly not so barbaric after all, as long as the enslaved person was "duly convicted of a crime."[41]

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[40] Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, xvii.
[41] U.S. Const. amend. 13, sec. 1.

The integration of the traditional slave society into modern capitalism produced a system that many historians have argued was "worse than slavery."[42] Racism did not suddenly dissolve under modern capitalism, it just evolved into a more insidious and consumptive system. Writing of slavery, Union Army Major General James H. Wilson predicted its eventual evolution:

> "The people express an external submission to its Abolition, but there is an evident desire on the part of some to get the matter within their own control, after the re-organization of the State. Others are anxious to substitute a gradual system of emancipation, or a modified condition of Slavery, similar to Peonage. . . . The whole system of Slavery, and slave labor must be effectually destroyed . . . If a single particle of life is left in the institution, or the original guardians of it are allowed any influence, . . . they will resuscitate and perpetuate its inequities."[43]

More than just a "single particle of life" was left in the subsequent iteration of slavery under the convict lease system. Through the creation of the lease system, slavery was abolished in name only.

Proposing modern capitalism as the bearer of material and social progress, the architects of the New South failed to foresee that the invisible hand of the market would further institutionalize slavery. In Volume I of *Capital*, Marx wrote of the inevitable continuity of forced labor, despite the transfer of the institution's guardianship to modern capitalism, "As soon as peoples whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave labour … are drawn into a world market dominated by a capitalist mode of production … the civilized horrors of overwork are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery."[44] Instead of delivering Southerners, White and Black alike, into a "golden age" of material prosperity,[45] the modernization of the economy

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[42] David Oshinsky, *"Worse than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. (New York: Free Press, 1996). See also Matthew Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866 –1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

[43] Wilson to Brig. Gen. W. D. Whipple, from Macon, GA, June 15, 1865, quoted in C. Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction In Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865-1872* (Atlanta: Cherokee, 1971), 53.

[44] Karl Marx, *Capital a Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1, The Process of Production of Capital* (Richmond: Electric Book, 2001), 339-40.

[45] Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture*, 150.

functioned exactly as Karl Marx had predicted, according to Howard Zinn, by feigning "neutrality to maintain order, but serving the interests of the rich."[46]

In spite of the boastful declarations of success that flooded the public discourse during the time, the New South campaign failed to fully accomplish any of its three goals. The campaign did in fact succeed in its promise to industrialize the South, catapulting Atlanta to the forefront of industry. However, the masses of poor southerners never enjoyed the resulting material gains, which went straight to the pockets of the elite. The New South, according to Southern historian C. Vann Woodward, offered "juleps for the few and pellagra for the crew." Sectional relations did improve during this time but only through the careful construction of diplomatic lies, affirming the competing desires of both Northern investors and White Southerners. Lastly, it is important to note that the "pro-business" and paternal conditions of the New South did enable the development of Black businesses and the Black elite class in Atlanta. Much like their White counterparts, the material success in the Black community was not universally enjoyed and often under attack from embittered Whites. The success of the exceptional few was a necessary tool to maintain the status quo, showing that the New South's promise of progress was attainable as long as you worked hard enough. In reality, the instrument of progress – economic development – ensured the future of racial subjugation and exploitation in the New South.

Although the vows of the New South were empty, the campaign's power and influence lay in the mythic image it promoted, not the results it promised. Comparatively, the New South myth has been far more influential in the construction of the Southern identity and future interpretation of the South's past. In his article, "The Necessity of Myth," Schorer defines myths

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[46] Howard Zinn, "Robber Barons and Rebels." *A People's History of the United States: 1492--Present* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003), 258.

as "the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves."[47] Myths provide a context for the values, norms, and ideals through which we interpret our identity, defining "the myth-makers world, his position in it, his destiny, and his appropriate attitude."[48] They combine real and imaginary forces to produce a new reality, what Gaston aptly characterized as a "force in history."[49]

With the Old South "down among the dead men," the New South campaign crafted the spirit, history, and identity of Atlanta according to the mythic gospel of progress.[50] This gospel, Lawrence Langer warned, was an alluring and "persisting myth about the triumph of the spirit that colors the disaster with a rosy tinge and helps us to manage the unimaginable without having to look at its naked and ugly face."[51] This myth posits a historical continuity that inevitably builds toward 'the good life,' justice, and economic growth. It presupposes that the conditions of the past were necessarily worse than the present and that the conditions of the future will always be better. This logic is a powerful disciplinary tool, intercepting any disruptions to the status quo by placating the masses. Additionally, the gospel of progress assumes an inextricable link between social prosperity and capitalist growth, and, in effect, legitimates the means used to effectuate that progress. This myth is a dangerous and enduring ideological weapon—it promises universal prosperity but offers no other justificatory evidence other than idealizations of the power of the 'human will.'

The power of myths lies in their ability to distort the past, shaping the public consciousness according to the values espoused by the myth. In his book, *Mythologies*, Roland

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[47] Mark Schorer, "The Necessity of Myth." *Daedalus* 88, no. 2 (1959): 360, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20026502.
[48] Robert Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 11, no. 1 (1935): 97.
[49] Gaston, *The New South Creed,* 9.
[50] Edwin DeLeon, "The New South: What it is Doing and What it Wants," *Putnam's Magazine* 15 (April 1870): 458.
[51] Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

Barthes deconstructs the function and modes of dominant myths, which serve not to repress historical meaning but rather to contort it to achieve political ends. According to Barthes, myth functions to "empty reality" of its historical quality and to naturalize the mythic image of the past. Barthes' conception of mythology as a device that "*harmonizes* with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself," parallels the New South goal to craft a historical representation of "not what ought to be or would be, but . . . what already was."[52]

Interpreting the history of Atlanta through the context of the myth, the very praised sites of progress suddenly reveal pervasive inaccuracies. To see beyond the distorted history crafted by the New South myth, we must begin our inquiry at the sites of these inaccuracies—events that contradicted the promise of widespread progress. In the following chapter, I conduct a genealogy of the Chattahoochee Brick, which came to represent the rise of the New South, despite its contradictory meaning as a site of racial violence and exploitation. These sites of mythic contradiction hold the key to liberating the history and identity of Atlanta from the domain of the New South myth.

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[52] Gaston, *The New South Creed*, 7, 9.

Chapter 2

The Chattahoochee Brick Company: A Case Study in Mythic Contradiction

> Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
> The books are filled with names of kings.
> Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone? -
> Bertolt Brecht[53]
>
> The Captain holler hurry,
> Goin' to take my time.
> Say captain holler hurry,
> Goin' to take my time.
> Say he makin' money,
> And I'm trying to make time.
> Say he can lose his job,
> But I can't lose mine. - Convict work song[54]

The Chattahoochee Brick Company, praised as a major profiteer and contributor to the New South's image of progress, largely rebuilt Atlanta from the ashes of the Old South. With the New South's mutual-aid society to thank, the economic success of the company largely depended on the reconstruction of the charred built environment and the South's defeated reputation after the war. As the largest and most successful Southern brick manufacturer during the Gilded Age, the Chattahoochee Brick Company embodied the New South ideals of material growth and unbridled ambition. But beneath this guise of business progressivism lies a gruesome and largely forgotten history, which transformed Black bodies into commodities and corpses. At every supposed site of progress, its collateral, synonymous with Atlanta's low-income and Black communities, is dismissed and eliminated from history. Throughout this chapter, I attempt to disentangle the New South myth from the past, exposing the neglected collateral that empowered the myth's credibility.

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[53] Bertolt Brecht, *Selected Poems*, trans. By H. R. Hays (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 109.
[54] Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 106-7.

After the Union's victory in the Civil War, Congress passed the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments, abolishing slavery, endowing equal protection of the laws, and conferring universal male suffrage, respectively. Although Reconstruction presented significant improvements to the economic, social, and political welfare of previously-enslaved people, the advances were short-lived. Legal shortcuts were quickly discovered and exploited, and soon, slavery was abolished in name only.

One of the key culprits is the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery and involuntary servitude, "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."[55] The addition of the amendment's exception clause nixed any claim to the abolition of forced bondage in the "land of the free," employing convicts to solve the labor shortage in the aftermath of emancipation.[56] The ticket to slavery's resurrection in the United States lies in the very amendment that ostensibly abolished it. Hidden beneath the guise of progress, that oft-ignored clause reimagined slavery under the pretense of 'race-neutrality,' giving birth to the convict labor system that would soon rebuild the progressive New South.

Lee's surrender at Appomattox did not suddenly compel a systematic overhaul of the Southern political economy and social hierarchy founded on white supremacy. Left with the choice to either adapt to the new conditions or die, the system of slavery evolved. Under the Redeemer rule, "the courts of law [were] employed to enslave the colored race."[57] Filling the hole left behind by the now-illegal Slave codes, the Black codes of the New South ensured anxious Whites that the status quo of racial domination would not be disturbed. The Black Codes functioned "to keep the Negro exactly what he was: a propertyless rural laborer under strict

[55] U.S. Const. amend. 13, sec. 1.
[56] Francis Scott Key, "Defence of Fort M'Henry," (Baltimore, MD: Sept 17, 1814), https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010457/.
[57] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 594.

controls, without political rights, and with inferior legal rights."[58] Although the Black codes did not explicitly address race, they were exclusively enforced against freedmen and women. Constrained by the citizenship protections established by the 14th Amendment, race or color alone were no longer sufficient explanations for control. Thus, the Black codes reproduced Old South knowledge systems under the guise of 'race-neutrality' to conform to the progressive New South punishment model.

The Black codes were largely inspired by—and legitimated—pseudoscientific explanations for 'Negro Crime,' which proposed that criminality and deviance were inherent traits of all members of the Black race. According to this logic, such innate delinquency could only be tamed through the ethic of hard work under the supervision of the White race. In actuality, the Black codes served as the newest instrument of white supremacy, criminalizing the actions and behavior stereotypically associated with the newly-emancipated population. In his seminal study of the convict leasing system in the South, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the culprit of "the appearance of crime among Southern Negroes is a symptom of wrong social conditions—of a stress of life greater than a large part of the community can bear," rather than the inherent criminality.[59]

Corrupt sheriffs, labor agents, and judges exploited the loosely-defined laws of vagrancy and the pervasive illiteracy of the law among the newly-emancipated population in order to justify the illegitimate and frivolous arrests of freedmen and freedwomen. This loophole took advantage of innocent individuals, forcing them to serve, and often perish in the process, at the labor camps fueling Atlanta's industrialism. White law enforcement officers lustfully took

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[58] Kenneth A. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: 1965), 79.
[59] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Spawn of Slavery: The Convict-Lease System in the South," In *Race, Crime, and Justice: A Reader*, ed. by Shaun L. Gabbidon and Helen Taylor Greene, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 8.

advantage of their power as the stewards of the Southern racial order, often conducting wholesale arrests of Black vagrants. Commenting on the use of the 'justice' system as a tool of racial subordination, prominent activist Ray Stannard Baker remarked that given the system's ability to furnish "steady, cheap labour to the contractors and a profit to the state," "the natural tendency is to convict as many men as possible."[60] Against the authority of the state and the decisiveness of White witnesses, "the testimony of a Negro counted for little or nothing in court."[61] Emancipation offered little respite for African Americans as targeted arrests and incarceration dashed dreams of freedom for the crime of being Black in the American South.

As the prisons swelled beyond capacity, a lucrative opportunity presented itself to the war-torn and debt-ridden states of the South. Alabama, the first state to establish the convict lease system, cashed in on the opportunity to outsource punishment, including all costs associated with housing and feeding their bloated prison population. Suddenly, a new workforce of cheap, reliable labor emerged to fill the chasm left behind by slavery, except in this system, convict laborers cost a mere fraction of those in enslavement. With the costs of convict leasing fixed, the per-capita cost of prison labor was reduced to mere cents a day. Because the individual convict constituted such an insignificant investment, lessees faced little negative repercussions for too harsh of punishment. When the 'justice' system offers a constant stream of cheap labor, mutilation and death of laborers no longer represent a loss.

Such indifference for life is the linchpin for the contemporary scholarly debate on whether the convict lease system is the functional equivalent of slavery. Although recognizing the comparable functions of the two systems of forced labor, historian Matthew J. Mancini insists that the difference between the relative costs and value of labor distinguishes the convict

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[60] Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line American Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era* (reprint, New York: 1964), 50.
[61] *Id.*, 4.

lease system from its more well-known predecessor. Mancini explains, "When considered as a source of labor, then, slaves received a "wage" best thought of as aggregated, convicts one that was individual; as a form of capital, by contrast, slaves were individually significant, convicts collectively so."[62] Mancini argues that the value of convict laborers as aggregated capital presented an economic incentive to mistreat prisoners. Thus, from an economic perspective, the convict lease system was not tantamount to but far worse than slavery. Despite the glorification of the Thirteenth Amendment's abolition of slavery, the exclusion clause allowed for its evolution into a far more efficient and abusive system, demonstrating that more insidious weapons hide beneath the progressive guise of reform.

As argued by esteemed philosopher Michel Foucault, the history of the penal system lies within the history of progressive reform, and Georgia is no exception. When the state legislature modified the penal code in 1812, "confinement and hard labor" became the standard of punishment *par excellence*, replacing the previous system of English penal law which employed punishment as spectacle.[63] Plans to erect a three-story penitentiary in Milledgeville, the original capital of Georgia, were immediately underway. On May 10, 1817, the prison welcomed its first prisoner.[64] Within the decade, the penitentiary housed approximately 100 prisoners on any given day.[65] Capitalizing on the surplus of reliable labor at the penitentiary, several prison workshops were established to build "wagons, sculpted saddles, stitched shoes, tailored clothing" as well as perform "blacksmith work."[66] The state terminated this experiment after coming to terms with

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[62] Matthew Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 34.
[63] Report of the Principal Keeper of the Georgia Penitentiary, 1873, 54, GA. See also Talitha LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor In the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 65: LeFlouria describes the punishment of convicts through archaic means of "public hanging, branding in the hand with a hot iron, public whipping, ear cropping, banishment, fines, and imprisonment in the stocks, pillory or common jails."
[64] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 65.
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] *Id.*, 66.

the heavy financial burden of operating prison workshops. However, this trial established the groundwork for the model penal economy that would dominate the South in the coming decades.

The population of Georgia's antebellum penitentiary was exclusively White, as slave owners had full jurisdiction over the punishment of enslaved people. However, after the war, the prison population shifted to almost entirely Black men. This extreme shift in demographics can be attributed to the passage of the state's first vagrancy law on March 12, 1866, targeting and criminalizing "negro idleness." The law defined vagrants as "all persons leading an idle, immoral, or profligate life, who have no property to support them, and are able to work and do not work; all persons able to work having no visible and known means of a fair, honest, and reputable livelihood; all persons having a fixed abode, who have no visible property to support them, and who live by stealing or by trading in, bartering for, or buying stolen property; and all professional gamblers living in idleness."[67] Although the statute is *prima facie* race-neutral, corrupt sheriffs exploited the law's vague language to arrest newly freedmen and women unsuccessfully attempting to navigate an economy predicated on their subjugation.

The vagrancy statute was just another attempt to maintain the prevailing system of white supremacy, by endowing scientific and legal authority to the notion that African Americans can only be disciplined through hard work under the surveillance of the White superior. Indeed, the principal keeper of the Georgia Penitentiary from 1877 to 1885, John W. Nelms professed:

> "If we look into the history of those brought to the penitentiary, we will find that a large proportion are persons who have never formed habits of industry they know not what systematic labor is, either from a want of early training, or from a constitutional dislike for it. They look in every other direction for the means of

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[67] Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America During the Period of Reconstruction (from April 15, 1865, to July 15, 1870): Including a Classified Summary of the Legislation of the Thirty-Ninth, Fortieth, and Forty-First Congresses …*, (New York, NY: Negro Universities Press, 1866), 33. Print.

subsistence rather than to earn it by hard labor. Such persons are
but a step removed from the commission of crime."[68]

In 1902, the United States Commissioner of Labor Carroll D. Wright defended the "odious Lease System" on the grounds that in comparison to the "grinding" and "demoralizing" work demanded by the prison labor system in the late 18th century, "the condition of prison labor [was an] adequate index of real moral progress." Although convict leasing categorically failed to offer any corrective function, White southerners continued to perpetuate the myth that the system would miraculously save their Black neighbors from predestined criminal behavior and idleness.

Like much of the rest of the South, Georgia's first penitentiary lay in ruins after the war. War-torn and debt-ridden, Georgia could not afford to rebuild the state prison. The state of the post-war fiscal crisis was severe; by 1870, the state of Georgia was in debt to the tune of $6.54 million, which climbed to more than $10 million over the next decade.[69] Nevertheless, with the zealous enforcement of Black codes, local jails quickly swelled beyond capacity. In 1866, the state attempted to remedy the overcrowding of the jails and penitentiary by increasing the sentencing of harsher crimes to capital punishment and requalifying certain crimes as misdemeanors.[70] Still, it was not enough. To accommodate the rising incarceration, a complete transformation of the prison system was necessary, and "the penitentiary that was least expensive was considered most successful."[71]

Faced with crippling debt, battle-scarred towns, and an engorged prison population, state officials soon discovered that these obstacles presented a lucrative opportunity. Rather than rebuild the state prison, the Georgia General Assembly decentralized the prison system,

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[68] *Report of the Principal Keeper*, 1878, 8, GA.
[69] In present-day value, $6.54 million in 1870 is equivalent to approximately $141 million, whereas $10 million in 1880 is equivalent to $278 million. Myers, *Race, Labor, and Punishment In the New South*, 15.
[70] Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 29.
[71] Fletcher Melvin Green, "Some Aspects of the Convict Labor System in the Southern States," In *Essays in Southern History* 31 (1949): 116.

outsourcing punishment to the highest bidder. Suffering severe limits on capital, Southern industrialists were desperate to find reliable replacements for inexpensive labor after emancipation. Convict leasing offered the perfect solution to the South's fiscal crisis, relieving the state of the financial burdens of re-building and operating a prison while simultaneously generating mass profits for the state. Equipped with cheap, reliable labor, industrialists could re-build the New South at enormous profit margins, all while effectively maintaining the foundational system of racial stratification.

In December of 1866, the Georgia General Assembly authorized the governor to outsource punishment of convicts to "relieve the State from all further expense."[72] However, the first lease in Georgia wasn't drawn up until 1868, when Thomas Ruger, the provisional governor, assumed office. On May 11 of that year, Governor Ruger awarded the first convict lease contract of 100 men to William A. Fort of the Georgia and Alabama Railroad for a fee of $2,500 a month.[73] Despite the fact that dozens of convicts died under his tutelage, the state declared the lease system a success. By December 1868, the state accepted the bids of entrepreneurs Thomas Alexander and William Grant of the Grant, Alexander, and Company, passing off 113 convicts.[74] By June 1869, the governor divested the state of all prisoners, leasing all 393 felons to work on the Macon and Brunswick Railroad.[75]

During these early years of the convict lease system, all that the state required from the lessees was the assumption of full responsibility for feeding, housing, clothing, and grooming the convicts. It wasn't until 1872, when Grant, Alexander, and Company agreed upon a $50 per-capita fee, that the state began to profit from the system.[76] By 1874, the state accrued more

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[72] Georgia Assembly 1866: 155.
[73] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 67.
[74] *Id.,* 68.
[75] Myers, *Race, Labor, and Punishment In the New South*, 16.
[76] *Ibid.*

than $14,000 (approximately $342,000 in present-day value) from the leasing system.[77] That same year, Governor James Milton Smith authorized a five-year lease on convict labor among prominent entrepreneurs and corporations, including T.J. Smith and H. Taylor, John T. and William D. Grant, Northeastern Railroad, Henry Stevens, Wallis, Haley and Company, Dade Coal Company, and George D. Harris.[78]

In 1876, the Georgia General Assembly approved legislation, largely influenced by the interests of prominent industrialists, that further deregulated and decentralized the prison system. This new law authorized Governor Smith to grant leases for a minimum of twenty years, the longest state leasing contract in all of the South in exchange for a flat fee of $25,000 per year.[79] This legislation additionally relieved the state of all expenses except the salaries of the principal keeper, the chaplain, and the physician. Seemingly providing for protections of the convict laborers, this law formally prohibited the common practice among leasees to sublet convicts and authorized penalties, including a fine of $400 for cruelty and $200 for escapes.[80] However, these meager fines were seldom imposed, and thus, lessees found no incentive to restructure their highly-profitable system of prison exploitation.[81] Although lauded as a humanitarian reform, these precautions failed to incur any benefits for the laborers, whose supervisors would either pay the measly fines or destroy evidence of their wrongdoing. Moreover, the Acts of 1876 removed the few safeguards in place for the safety and welfare of convicts. Prior to the Acts' passage, convict laborers legally could not be worked for more than ten hours a day, six days a week. Under the new law, the work schedule was up to the discretion of the employer, so long as

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[77] Principal Keeper of the Penitentiary, 1874, 1875.
[78] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 73.
[79] Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another,* 87.
[80] Berry, *Free Labor He Found Unsatisfactory*, 18.
[81] Myers, *Race, Labor, and Punishment In the New South*, 19.

it wasn't "unreasonable or oppressive."[82] Endowed with twenty-year leasing contracts and relieved from state supervision, industrialists quickly took advantage of this new law.

Although the legislature supposedly intended for a single company to conduct operations, the twenty-year leases were divided amongst three private corporations known as Penitentiary Companies No. 1, 2, and 3, charted immediately pursuant to the 1876 legislation.[83] Penitentiary Company No. 1, chartered in Dade County, consisted of Joseph Brown, his son Julius, John T. And William D. Grant, and Jacob Seaver, a Boston investor.[84] Penitentiary Company No. 2, the largest lessee of the three, was charted in Dougherty County by B.G. Lockett, J.W. Lockett, W.B. Lowe, and John B. Gordon.[85] The last company, chartered in Greene County, was owned by John W. Murphy, William D. Grant, W.E. Simpson, Thomas Alexander, and John W. Renfroe. However, the company was later reorganized so that James W. English, the CEO and president of the Chattahoochee Brick Company, was the majority shareholder.

Once the largest brick manufacturer in all of the South, the Chattahoochee Brick Company was known for making the "best brick on the market."[86] James W. English, decorated Confederate soldier and local notable, and prominent entrepreneur W.B. Lowe founded the Chattahoochee Brickworks in 1878, one year after the Reconstruction period ended. Strategically located at the intersection of Proctor Creek and the Chattahoochee River, just nine miles northwest of Atlanta proper, the brickworks had the advantage of on-site sourcing, with the rich Georgia red clay sitting along the fertile banks. After visiting the brickyards, a journalist for the *Atlanta Constitution* remarked with awe that "so fine is this clay that when it is crumbled between the thumb and finger it goes into dust, and if damp smoothes out a surface as slick as

[82] Acts, 1876, 43.
[83] *Id.*, 86.
[84] *Id.*, 88.
[85] *Ibid.*
[86] "Bricks: A Great Industry on the Chattahoochee," *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 23, 1882, https://www.proquest.com/docview/494824938/.

glass."[87] The brickyards also enjoyed the convenience of nearby transportation, situated on the Georgia Pacific Railroad with a number of cars constantly at the ready to transport the finished product to its final destination.

By 1886, English purchased Lowe's shares of the company, becoming the majority shareholder and sole owner of the CBC.[88] That same year, English gained control of Penitentiary Company No. 3, revolutionizing the convict lease system by profiting from the leasing contracts between the penitentiary company and the CBC. Now, acting as both lessor and lessee, English gained an annual return of 380 percent in leasing payments.[89] By the late 1890s, the CBC controlled more than 1,200 of the state's 2,881 leased convicts.[90] At the turn of the century, the CBC became one of the largest contractors of convict labor in Georgia, controlling more than half of Georgia's leased felons.[91] At the height of the production, an average of 175 convicts a month toiled at the brickyards. His massive labor force made an estimated 200,000 bricks a day, all using pre-industrial techniques.[92]

From sunrise to sunset, the convict laborers at the brickyards toiled at their Herculean tasks, scared to slow beyond a brisk pace for fear that 'Captain' James T. Casey, the camp overseer, would exact his despotic rage. Approximately thirty prisoners, armed with picks and shovels, dug up the fertile clay and loaded it into a mule-driven "dump car"[93] to be transported to the processing plant, where it was emptied for workers to separate the clay.[94] During the milling

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[87] *Id.*
[88] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 82.
[89] *Ibid.*
[90] *Ibid.*
[91] *Id.*, 12.
[92] Richard Becherer, "Bricks and Bones: Discovering Atlanta's Forgotten Spaces of Neo-Slavery," in *Proceedings of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture Annual Meeting*, ed. Mark Goulthorpe and Amy Murphy (2012), 347.
[93] "Bricks".
[94] Becherer, "Bricks and Bones," 347.

stage, the prisoners added "ground schist," a foliated metamorphic rock to the loose clay.[95] Workers then proceeded to add water to the clay mixture, which was promptly deposited in a grinder for refinement. Once finished, the product was then placed into several brick-making machines, which molded and cut the clay into 2 1/2-by-4 1/2-inch bricks.[96]

The fresh, uncooked brick slabs baked in the sun for three days to cure. Prisoners then carried hundreds of thousands of cured bricks to the drying kilns, "where they bathed in waste heat in preparation to be burned."[97] Once dried, two dozen workers rapidly carried the bricks to one of nearly twelve coal-fired kilns known as "clamps." According to the testimony of one convict, the labor squad charged with transferring the bricks from the drying belt was entirely composed of female prisoners.[98] One worker had to scale each of these massive ten-foot-high kilns to load upwards of 140,000 bricks to be burned at hellish temperatures. In order to make 'task,' the labor squad had to transfer bricks at a rate of fifty per minute for nine hours.[99] An eyewitness reported in awe that "when a kiln is burned, it requires four or five days for it to cool off before the bricks can be handled. Hades, or an iron furnace cannot be much hotter than one of these kilns when in full blast … it takes forty tons of coal to burn one kiln, besides thirty cords of wood and several tons of coke."[100] The conditions inside where the laborers spent hours packing and unloading the still-hot brick molds were so sweltering that according to one testimony, the guards refused to wear a pistol on their person in fear that the cartridge might spontaneously fire.[101]

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[95] David Berry, *Free Labor He Found Unsatisfactory: James W. English and Convict Lease Labor at the Chattahoochee Brick Company*, Diss. Athens: Georgia State University, 1991, 47, *Archives of Appalachia*, https://archivesofappalachia.omeka.net/items/show/8514.
[96] Becherer, "Bricks and Bones," 347.
[97] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 83.
[98] Charles Edward Russell, "A Burglar in the Making," *Everybody's Magazine* 18 (June 1908): 755.
[99] Berry, *Free Labor He Found Unsatisfactory*, 49.
[100] "Bricks".
[101] Convict Lease Investigation, 1908, 128.

Finally, a "brick gang" was forced to sprint seventy yards from the kilns, carrying the still-hot bricks to load them into the train cars for transport, or otherwise risked "being beat to death."[102] All of this intense work was scrupulously observed by 'Captain' Casey, the overseer infamous for his vicious and sadistic punishments. He would whip fifteen to twenty prisoners a day, "often until they 'begged and screamed,' fell dead on the ground, or toppled over from exhaustion, heatstroke, of the effects of fiendish brutality."[103] If any prisoner failed to make 'task,' slowed their constant double-time "trotting" pace to a walk, or were found to be recalcitrant, Captain Casey waited eagerly, whip in hand, to dole out punishment, typically 8-10 'licks.'[104]

For those too sick or injured to productively perform the arduous tasks of brickmaking were charged with working as washermen, cooks, and gardeners.[105] If the company enjoyed a surplus of labor, English would sublet the convicts to his other operations or to his colleagues, despite the prohibition on subleases in 1876. No labor was ever wasted at the Chattahoochee brickyards.

The dangerous conditions of the brickyard left many of the convicts permanently maimed and severely wounded. The bacteria-laden cabins offered no refuge for the overworked and abused prisoners, often exacerbating existing injuries. R.F. Wright, Georgia's assistant keeper of the penitentiary, was horrified by the "inhuman and barbarous" conditions, reporting the high prevalence of insufficient or rotten food, vermin, poor ventilation, and abysmal sanitation.[106] The congressional investigation into the conditions of the camp affirmed Wright's findings, citing the prevalence of unsanitary bedding, the filthy, ragged clothing, and unhealthy food.[107] According to

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[102] *Id.*, 771.
[103] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 86.
[104] Becherer, "Bricks and Bones," 443.
[105] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 84.
[106] *Special Message of the Governor of Georgia,* 1895, 3, 7-9.
[107] Acts, 1908, Extraordinary Session, 1072-3.

one report at the hearing, the bedding was only washed once a year by running it through the Chattahoochee River.[108] Between 1884 and 1886, multiple convicts died from tuberculosis, pneumonia, malarial fever, edema, neuralgia, "portal congestion," constipation, and "eye diseases," which arose from the rat-infested prison barracks and poor working conditions.[109]

The circumstances were just as grave, if not worse, for the female convicts forced to work at the brickyards. Many suffered from gynecological problems born from or exacerbated by the harsh working conditions. Conditions such as "dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation) … amenorrhea (suppressed menstruation), leukorrhea (vaginal discharge mingled with pus), menorrhagia (excessive menstrual bleeding), "womb disease," "Inflations of ovaries," and "prolapsus uteri (falling of the womb)" induced severe suffering among more than a dozen convicts, often disregarded by the camp physician.[110] As opposed to the convict lease system's 'abolished' counterpart, reproductive abilities were viewed as a disadvantage, inevitably decreasing the productivity of the camp. However, the Chattahoochee Brick Company did not place any protections for women from the undesired conquests of the overseer, guards, and fellow prisoners. Between 1884 and 1890, fifteen children took their first breath at the brickyards.[111] Mary Church Terrell, the author of *A Colored Woman in a White World,* remarked on the acute rate of infant mortality at the camp: "Women have often been placed in dark, damp, disease-breeding cells, whose cubic contents are less than those of a good-size grave, and they had given birth to children who had breathed the polluted atmosphere of this dens of vice and woe from the moment they had uttered their first cry into the world until they had been relieved from their suffering by death."[112]

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[108] *Id.*, 127.
[109] Biennial Report of the Principal Physician of the Georgia Penitentiary, 1884-86, 129-31, GA.
[110] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 84, quoting the *Biennial Report of the Principal Physician*, 1886-88, 104-15, GA; and *Report of the Principal Keeper*, 1888-90, 15-17, GA.
[111] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 97.
[112] Mary Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, D.C.: Ransdell, 1940), 168.

It is speculated that many of the laborers who died in the brickworks are buried in unmarked graves throughout the property. Inspired by the sinister lore of the brickyards, Richard Becherer and Dennis Stewart conducted an oral history of the descendants of Avery Bates, a convict employed by 'Captain' English. This interview confirmed the speculation that the company disposed of the bodies of the many prisoners that died at the camps but whose death was never recorded.[113] Other allegations contend that the corpses of murdered workers were sometimes thrown into the brick kilns, indicating that all bricks produced during the tenure of convict leasing contain traces—however small—of human remains, giving new meaning to the 'blood-red brick' that saturates the city.[114] Given penalties established by the legislature in 1876, the company had a financial incentive to destroy evidence of wrongdoing, or at least of cruelty. With the bodies of their victims incinerated, the state could only charge the company for what appeared to be negligent escapes. Even this practice was justified in order to maintain the image of the company's progressivism.

The state's decentralization of the prison system does not suggest that the state had a hands-off approach to the convict lease economy—quite the contrary. The entire restructuring of the prison system and the state economy revolved around the convict lease system. In fact, the state of Georgia had included the costs of convict labor in the annual budget from 1866 to 1908. Political officials profited from dual investments in the state and the broader capitalist system in the burgeoning industrialist state. Support for the convict lease system was a surefire way to advance their political interests, establish relationships with powerful industrialists, and profit from their successes.

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[113] Dorothy Roper and Bryan Roper, interview, April 9, 2011.
[114] Becherer, "Bricks and Bones," 439.

Businessman and a member of the Atlanta elite, Captain English personified the historical love affair between business and governance in Atlanta. English built an empire through the acquisition of several southern companies: Chattahoochee Brick Company, Iron Belt Railroad & Mining, Georgia Pacific Railroad, Durham Coal and Coke, and Penitentiary Company #3. As of 1878, the year he announced his candidacy for Mayor of Atlanta, English had served as a member of the city council and chairman of the finance committee for two years.[115] Still a partner in the Chattahoochee Brick Company, English served as the mayor of postbellum Atlanta from 1881 to 1883, determined to clean up the streets through his crusade against crime. One of his notable initiatives as mayor was to pave all the roads in the city, in the name of public hygiene and sustainable infrastructure that would weather even Sherman's fiery wrath. However, it was not a coincidence that in the first year of English's term the city contracted the Chattahoochee Brick Company to pave all of the roads. After his first term as mayor, English was named the Commissioner of Police, which he held from 1883 to 1906.[116] Atlanta Historian, Richard Becherer, astutely noted that English's service as the head of the police "reassured Atlanta's industrial elite of reliable access to virtually no-cost labor for a host of other labor-intensive enterprises like his."[117]

Although later dismissed as "a blast on the fair name of our beloved State," the success of the convict lease system played a pivotal role in the economic and industrial stimulation that earned the title "Empire State" of the New South.[118] Between 1872 and 1886, Georgia accumulated more than $6 million in today's buying power from the nascent penal economy.

[115] "J. W. English Announces for Mayor," *The Daily Constitution*, Nov. 17, 1878. https://www.proquest.com/docview/494673627.
[116] Becherer, "Bricks and Bones," 437.
[117] *Id.,* 440.
[118] Georgia House 1895: 830

Despite efforts to distinguish the progressive New South from its barbaric predecessor, both societies owe its development and wealth to the forced servitude of their Black residents.

As the twentieth century loomed, concerns about the abuse endemic to the convict lease system began to arise among progressive reformers. Gruesome details about the gratuitous violence and neglect at the camps flooded local and national newspapers, calling for systemic prison reform. Given the decreasing popularity of the system, in 1897, the Georgia General Assembly decided to limit the lease term to five years but refused to abolish the system entirely.

The popular narrative about the demise of the convict lease system in the New South is overwhelmingly characterized by calls for humanitarian reform. The increasing awareness of the abuses carried out daily at the camps did contribute to the system's eventual abolition. However, as argued by Matthew Mancini in his book *One Dies, Get Another*, the primary reason the legislature terminated the lease was the same as why they created it: profit. The more fundamental criticism of convict leasing concerned the ethics of "farming off" convicts to the wealthy entrepreneurs for personal profit. The ethical issue, in this case, is not profiting from prison labor but rather *who* profits from that work. Critics demanded that the labor of the state's prisoners should benefit all members of the state, not just greedy industrialists. Principal Keeper Darnell argued that "the convict element should not .. be thrown into the channel of commercial speculation, subject to the highest bidder, to the loss and serious inconvenience of the people of the whole State. Convicts, during their time of confinement, belong exclusively to the State."[119] Coincidentally, this criticism rose to popularity at the same time as the Good Roads campaign, which sought to improve and expand the county roads throughout the state. In this case of exploiting prison labor for centralized capital, the citizens reaped the benefits of quality roads that connected their districts.

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[119] Principal Keeper of the Penitentiary 1870: 10

Public outrage coalesced with opposition from organized labor, which lamented the unfair competition convict labor presents in the free market. Indeed, a reporter for the *Birmingham Age-Herald* voiced the popular sentiment of working-class Whites, arguing that "employers of convicts pay so little for their labor that it makes it next to impossible for those who give work to free labor to compete with them in any line of business. As a result, the price paid for labor is based upon the price paid convicts."[120]

The Panic of 1907 delivered the *coup de grace* to the convict lease system in Georgia. Faced with an enormous production surplus with no willing buyers, the once prosperous brickyards, sawmills, and mining companies were forced to shut down.[121] Suddenly, hundreds of laborers, still in the custody of the lessees, could no longer work. The convict lease system at its current state was no longer profitable.

On September 19, 1908, the General Assembly of Georgia formally abolished the convict lease system, set to go into effect after March 31, 1909, when the last lease expired. The Act required that "all make felony convicts, except such as are now required by law to be kept at the State Farm, may … be employed by the authority of the several counties and municipalities upon the public roads, bridges, and other public works." The next year, nearly five thousand prisoners set off to work on county roads.[122]

Although the abolition of the convict lease system did not signal an end to legalized forced labor, it dealt a heavy blow to the Chattahoochee Brick Company, which was still recovering from the recent economic depression. When the steady stream of cheap replacements suddenly dried up in 1909, so too did the CBC's profits. The following year, production at the

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[120] Birmingham Age-Herald, 1899; Mancini 53, note 43
[121] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 174.
[122] *Id.*, 175.

brickyards plummeted by 50%.[123] Just like the cheap labor he coveted, James English discovered that when he could no longer sell his bricks at incomparable prices, his company, too, was replaceable.

After 1909, the Chattahoochee Brick Company fell from prominence, joining Atlanta's vast graveyard of companies that failed to maintain impossible profit margins. In a city so quick to privilege progress above history, the "largest single brick yard in the United States," was soon dismissed as a stain on the legacy of the Gate City.[124] The Chattahoochee brickyards and the prison labor forced to rebuild the industrial capital of the New South from the ashes of the Old South was reduced to an error, a mere blip in the historical continuity of progress definitive of Atlanta. Erroneously dismissed as the exception and not the rule, the horrors of the Chattahoochee Brick Company drifted from the collective memory.

Nonetheless, the legacy of the Chattahoochee Brick Company prevails throughout many of the streets and buildings of Atlanta. Although the remaining buildings on the brickyards were demolished in 2011, hundreds of damaged or otherwise unsellable products called "brickbats" are littered throughout the ruins. Adjacent to the vestiges of the Chattahoochee brickyard, James English's bricks can be spotted in the remains of Whittier Mill. Those same bricks can also be found in the red exterior of surrounding houses, originally built to house the mill community.

Atlanta's West Midtown neighborhood, which was largely developed by James English and his son, is especially saturated with the company's blood-red brick. Several buildings within Atlanta's Marietta Street Artery district were built with English's brick, including the complex of industrial buildings constructed for the 1881 Cotton Exposition. The most notable sites of Chattahoochee brick in this district can be found in the Van Winkle Gin and Machine Works and

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[123] Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans From the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 351.
[124] "Bricks".

the King Plow Works plants, which now serve as commercial art centers. Less than a mile east stands the Atlanta Waterworks Hemphill Avenue Station, the city's second waterworks complex, adorned with Chattahoochee brick. Just a mile south, located in the Means Street Historic District, the Atlanta Spring and Bed Company and Allied Factory Lofts, now both mixed-use developments, also contain this brick. Underneath layers of asphalt, the streets lining the adjacent English Avenue, named on behalf of James English's son, and Vine City are paved with Chattahoochee brick.

Crossing over I-85 that divides the city at its heart, Chattahoochee brick can also be spotted in Cabbagetown, Reynoldstown, and Grant Park. The walls enclosing the Historic Oakland Cemetery, where James English is buried, are furnished with his brick. The brick can also be found lining the streets and homes throughout Grant Park, including the historic Girls High School, now the Roosevelt Historic Apartment Homes. The legacy of the Chattahoochee Brick Company has been spotted as far east as Kirkwood, adoring the Pratt-Pullman Yard, now an arts center and popular filming site, and as far north as the Gwinnett County Courthouse. However, countless buildings made of Chattahoochee brick are likely to still be standing, unidentified throughout the midwestern United States, the southeast, New England, and Europe.[125]

However, not all that remains standing today reflects the pervasive influence of the Chattahoochee Brick Company in the reconstruction of Atlanta. Countless buildings identified as containing Chattahoochee brick were unfortunately demolished during the urban renewal movement of the 50s and 60s. Thus, the last remaining artifacts of convict laborers who perished at the hands of 'Captain' English's empire were lost to later campaigns of 'progress' and city rebuilding.

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[125] LeFlouria, *Chained In Silence*, 83; for more see Berry, *Free Labor He Found Unsatisfactory.*

Despite the ubiquitous presence of the Chattahoochee brick throughout Atlanta, very rarely do onlookers recognize its gruesome history. We know the brick is there—we see and interact with it every day. Oddly enough, brick, a material connoted by strength, permanence, and structure is reduced entirely to a quaint building material. Homes containing Chattahoochee brick are celebrated for their "charm" and "character," and realtors are quick to sell eager buyers a slice of old Atlanta nobility.[126] Earning historical status, the meaning of the Chattahoochee brick transforms again as a means to profit. This demonstrates the evolution of the New South myth, the very agent which developed the perfect environment for unbridled capitalism, and its continued function as the midwife of new forms of capital.

Myths, Barthes argues, are *productive* not repressive—they adapt to new conditions to assert their continued relevance. They are "conveyed by a discourse" that latches onto surrounding objects, alienates them from their history, thereby suffocating them from their original meaning, and then imbues the hollow object with new, mythic meaning. [127] Centering his analysis of myth on the materials it attaches itself to, Barthes develops an appropriate methodology to analyze the Chattahoochee Brick within the context of the New South, as well as its absence of meaning in the contemporary built landscape.

To uncover a material's relationship with a myth, Barthes proposes three terms that constitute the myth: the signifier, the signified, and the signification, "which is the associative total of the first two terms."[128] The signified, Barthes explains, is the concept which penetrates the material form and alienates it from its original meaning. The concept interacts with the form to insert within it "a whole new history which is implanted in the myth."[129] The signifier is the

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[126] Quoting a real estate listing description of a site containing Chattahoochee Brick. https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/2959-Parrott-Ave-NW-Atlanta-GA-30318/35924016_zpid/

[127] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2013), 109.

[128] *Id.,* 113.

[129] *Id.,* 119.

material form that has been imbued with new meaning, now serving as an image of the concept. The signified elicits the "motivation which causes the myth to be uttered."[130] Finally, the signification is the "relation between concept and image," and is the very embodiment of the myth.[131] The signification "postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions;" it transforms the mythic history into nature, an inevitable product of the progressive grand narrative.[132] Here lies the principal function of the myth: it seeks to naturalize its reinterpretation of history. For when the "myth-consumer" interacts with the myth in its form as the signified, Barthes argues that the inserted meaning "is not read as a motive, but as a reason."[133]

If we apply this framework to the Chattahoochee brick that rebuilt Atlanta, the signified is the concept of progress associated with the New South, which latches onto the material form of the brick. The concept of progress alienates the brick from its history and original meaning and inserts itself as the new meaning. This produces the signifier, the brick as an image of progress. The New South myth, the signification, resides in this relation between the signified and the signifier, which reinterprets the brick as a symbol of New South progress, of the city's victorious rise from the ashes of the 'Old.' Grady's famed speech at Delmonico's perfectly demonstrates the mythic distortion of this brick as the embodiment of progress, stating that "from the ashes [Sherman] left us in 1864 we have raised a brave and beautiful city; that somehow or other we have caught the sunshine in the bricks and mortar of our homes, and have builded therein not one ignoble prejudice or memory."[134]

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[130] *Id.,* 118.
[131] *Id.,* 113.
[132] *Id.,* 117.
[133] *Id.,* 129.
[134] Grady, *The New South*, 7-8.

However, when residents interact with sites containing Chattahoochee brick contemporaneously, they are not struck by the same symbolism of progress. Quite the opposite, in fact, they value the brick only as a relic of the past, as a charming reminder of an old-fashioned Atlanta. Barthes explains that humanity's relationship to myth is predicated on political utility, not truth. When the object loses its relevance to the myth, the inserted meaning seeps away, leaving the object primed for a new interpretation that will promote profit. The concept of progress gains meaning from innovation, and, thus, constantly defines itself in the context of new objects as its symbols. When Atlanta lay in charred ruins, the Chattahoochee bricks that fortified the city served as fertile grounds for progressive symbolism. However, the meaning of the brick as a symbol of progress is historically-contingent; it responded to the historical and political circumstances of that era. As time progressed, the brick no longer functioned as an appropriate symbol of progress, but as a relic of the past to be romanticized. Instead of marketing the brick as the presence of a progress Atlanta, the New South myth's obsession with profit quickly adapted, distorting the meaning of the Chattahoochee brick as a symbol of quaintness to serve as a selling point.

This contortion of the brick's meaning is another product of the systematic injustice disguised by the New South progressive myth. The history of the Chattahoochee brick, inscribed by and with structural and systemic violence, informs its meaning as a material archive of racial terror. With its meaning radically transformed, residents of Atlanta today interact with this material archive either indifferently or, worse yet, admiringly, unaware of its history as both a product and a symbol of the New South. In her book *Losing Site: Architecture, Memory, and Space*, Shelley Hornstein laments this severance of spatial and material history from the public memory; she writes, "our lives are modulated, mediated, and moderated by the spaces of

architectural configurations—walls, streets, pathways, corridors, roofs, and so on—yet we would be hard-pressed to remember precisely the dimensions or details of places we frequent."[135]

By depriving the built environment of its history, the myth's continued existence obstructs political agency toward forms of justice by selectively shaping public memory. The politics of memory shapes the narrative and agenda surrounding reparations and justice, and by obstructing the meaning and history latent in the material archive of racial violence that, quite literally, lays the foundation of Atlanta, the New South myth continues to inflict injustice.

To build a path toward justice and reparations for the victims of the terror inflicted by the Chattahoochee Brick Company and the New South myth that condoned it, we must bear witness to this history, to "take a look at what we never saw even though it was right before our eyes."[136] In my final chapter, I will lay out an approach to what Saidiya Hartman calls the "incomplete project of freedom," through novel forms of commemorative justice to disrupt the hegemony of the New South myth and retrieve the original meaning of the Chattahoochee brick.

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[135] Shelley Hornstein, *Losing Site: Architecture, Memory and Place* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 88.
[136] *Id.*, 84.

Chapter 3

Commemorative Justice "In the Wake" of the New South Myth

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory
against forgetting." - Milan Kundera[137]

"We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past
and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think
of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion....
This is the reality in which we live." - Hannah Arendt[138]

"In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture
the present." - Christina Sharpe[139]

The fictions of the past shape the fictions of the present. The historical memory tends to

interpret the past through a rose-tinted lens, promoting and exaggerating events of 'progress.' All

that does not conform to this historical continuity of prosperity are dismissed as 'mistakes' and

subsequently eliminated from memory. Despite the fact that convict leasing was a necessary

component in the rapid industrial, economic, and political development in the New South, once

its image countered the perceived ideals and values of the myth, the significance of convict

leasing was reduced to a mere "blot" on "the pages of Georgia."[140] And yet, when the chain gang

era rose from the ashes of the righteously-conquered convict lease system, the so-called

'humanitarians' of the New South didn't bat an eye.

Instead of the progressive linearity boasted by the architects and successors of the New

South campaign, the evolution and persistent use of forced Black labor instead reveal a historical

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[137] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, NY: A. A. Knopf, 1981), 3.

[138] Hannah Arendt, "Preface to the First Edition," in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

[139] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

[140] "The Convict Lease Gone," *The Journal of Labor*, April 2, 1909.

continuity of exploitation and terrorism of the black body. Systems of structural racialized terror were not mere flukes but rather constitutive of the New South order. Thus, rather than a "blot" on the legacy of the New South, the convict lease system would be better characterized as its birthmark.

Myth deceives the public to believe that structural and systematic racial violence and exploitation are artifacts of the past, when in fact they still play out today, albeit in evolved, more insidious forms. The New South mythology continues to inflict injustice in the 21st Century by distorting the collective memory of the past to affirm and reproduce the values of the New South. As I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, the collective memory is a heated site of political contest, wielding the power to not only shape how communities identify themselves and interact with the public space but also how they perceive co-responsibility and political agency for past and continuing injustices.

In his book, *The Southern Past*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage argues that historical or collective memory is "the product of intentional creation," rather than an incidence of shared subconsciousness, and serves political ends.[141] Accordingly, which histories are collectively remembered and forgotten legitimizes an invented history by promoting historical instances of mythic continuity and eliminating events that contravene the myth. Memory studies scholar Eric Hobsbawm aptly remarked that "history is the raw material for nationalist or ethic of fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the material for heroin addiction. The past is an essential element, perhaps *the* essential element in these ideologies."[142] The coalescence of historical relativism and the New South myth of progress ensured that the validation of historical knowledge hedged on its consistency to the invented continuity of progress.

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[141] William Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 2005), 4.
[142] Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture*, 170.

The identity of the storyteller and the content of the story have far-reaching implications, constructing the narrative of the past and defining the aspirations of the future. Historian William Booth underscores the political ramifications of historical narrative construction, arguing that "how certain persons and events are made to stand in broad daylight; while others are consigned to the shadows of the forgotten is itself a story of filiation, power and memory."[143] Certain interpretations of history serve as powerful ideological instruments, targeting the two aspects of collective memory: remembrance and forgetfulness.

The preservation of certain histories within the collective memory is largely dependent on their consistency to the values of the prevailing myth. All that conforms to and supports the image of the New South or addresses present needs and tendencies will be legitimized as the official history of Atlanta, subsequently eliminating the antithetical residue. In the case of the former, these histories need not be true or accurate, as long as they produce a harmonizing historical memory that serves the interests of the ruling class. In the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, we "compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future." In the case of the latter, the eradication of contradictory histories bolsters the credibility of the myth. Best expressed by Ralph Ellison, "We've fled the past and trained ourselves to suppress, if not forget, troublesome details of the national memory, and a great part of our optimism... has been bought at the cost of ignoring the processes through which we've arrived at any given moment of our national existence."[144] The preservation of the New South myth depends on the collective forgetting of historical 'stains.'

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[143] William Booth, "The Work of Memory: Time, Identity, and Justice," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008), 241.

[144] Ralph Ellison, "Blues People," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2003), 280.

This reinterpretation and invention of history refashion power in the form of social and cultural identity. Our knowledge of the past is inextricably bound to our experience and perception of the present, especially of our understanding of social responsibility. Collective memory constructs social identity by characterizing "a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future."[145] Thus, with the collective memory under the dominion of the New South myth, the Atlanta identity emerged. Commonly called the 'Atlanta spirit,' the Atlanta identity is defined by ambition and hustle, championing the breathless pursuit of enterprise as the standard *par excellence*. This myth finds contemporary resonance in Atlanta's characterizations as the 'City Too Busy to Hate,' which is ironic given the city's historical and continuing prevalence of racial and economic inequality.

The collective memory is also largely dependent on the public spaces that communities regularly occupy and interact with. The public space offers what Paul Connerton calls a "socially specific spatial network," that provides context for and reaffirms the collective memory.[146] Collective memory cannot exist in a vacuum, disconnected from the spatial realm, but rather gains meaning in reference to this spatial network. This is because the relative permanence and stability of the public spaces we occupy "give us the illusion of not changing and of rediscovering the past in the present."[147]

Accordingly, the public space and its material landscape serve as sites of political contest over the collective memory. "By insinuating their memory into public space," Brundage argues, "groups exert the cultural authority, express the collective solidarity, and achieve a measure of the permanence that they often crave."[148] The commemoration of certain sites and objects serves

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[145] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (London, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 3.
[146] Paul Connerton, "Social Memory," in *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37.
[147] *Ibid.*
[148] Brundage, *The Southern Past,* 6.

to legitimize a given history, emphasizing the continuity between the ideals of the past and present. The built environment contextualizes the mythic public memory, commemorating events, sites, and leaders that honor the values of the New South. In doing so, it relegates all that is symbolically inconsistent, such as the Chattahoochee brick, to oblivion.

Ian Hacking has coined this political procedure of "pathological forgetting" as memoro-politics, which he defines as "a politics of the secret," hiding "forgotten event[s] that, when it is brought to light, can be memorialized in a narrative of pain.[149] Hacking's memoro-politics is best illuminated in George Orwell's famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which the manipulation of the past is a central tenet of the fictitious empire Ingsoc, which espoused "Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past."[150] Just like the Orwellian Big Brother, the kings and heirs of the New South order correctly understood the collective memory as a key to ensuring popular approval. So long as they eliminate histories unfavorable to the ruling order, flood the public consciousness with sanguine memories of progress, and silence the "terrain of forgotten pain," they can prevent public resistance that would threaten the political order.[151] The exercise of systematic forgetting is a key locale of totalitarianism, in which mental enslavement serves as an instrument of discipline and control.

The devaluation of the Chattahoochee brick in the public space helps to explain what Lorenzo Simpson calls "public amnesia" of the material's history and meaning as an archive of racial terror. This collective amnesia of the Chattahoochee brick's history and prevalence in the built environment enables the continuation of the New South myth. In his article, Simpson

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[149] Ian Hacking "Memoro-Politics," in *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 214.
[150] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, UK: Secker & Warburg, 1999), 34.
[151] Hacking, "Memoro-Politics," 213.

explains that public amnesia is a "distinctive modality through which epistemic injustice can be committed."[152] In other words, deprived of certain histories that challenge the dominant myth, residents of Atlanta are blind to the injustices rooted in the foundation of the city. By concealing and distorting recognition of inequity, despite its pervasiveness, the New South myth of progress suppresses political agency toward reparations. Additionally, the dismissal of past wrongs and continued remedial negligence produce what Thomas McCarthy calls "fresh wrongs" that compound the original injustice.[153]

So the question that faces us all now is: how can we break this cycle of injustice and work toward future remedy? There is no doubt that the past and continuing injustices rising from the gross mistreatment of the Chattahoochee Brick Company and the New South myth demand material, monetary, and symbolic forms of remedy. However, since the New South myth exercises its power on the terrain of collective memory, I limited my investigation to only forms of commemorative justice. In order to break the myth and prevent future harm justified under the same rationale of 'progress,' efforts to combat the myth must occur on the same plane of influence: the politics of memory.

The form of symbolic redress, which I call commemorative justice, may seem at first glance trivial or ineffectual, but I argue that it takes precedence above other forms of remedy because it uncovers the "terrain of forgotten pain," illuminating undiscovered sites for reparations.[154] Booth defines commemorative justice as the collective responsibility to uncover, preserve, and transmit the history of injustice "as a debt owed to the community (including its

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[152] Lorenzo Simpson, "Agency, the 'Politics of Memory,' and Reparative Justice: Hermeneutics and the Politics of Development," in *Hermeneutics as Critique: Science, Politics, Race, and Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021), 96.

[153] Thomas McCarthy, "Coming to Terms with Our Past, Part II: On the Morality and Politics of Reparations for Slavery," *Political Theory* 32, no. 6 (2004), 760.

[154] Hacking, "Memoro-Politics," 213.

dead), to guard that which is always vulnerable to forgetting."[155] Commemorative justice demands a duty of remembrance, to take accountability for past wrongs and preserve this history in the present memory, condemning public amnesia, or the "sin of memory."[156]

The reverberating effects of the injustices committed by the Chattahoochee Brick Company and, much more broadly, under the myth of progress, continue to affect residents of Atlanta today, more than a century later. Since the insidious effects of memoro-politics shape the thoughts and behaviors of all Atlantans, all of the city's residents are stakeholders in the pursuit of commemorative justice. But it would be inaccurate to state that the injustices justified under the myth of progress equally distributed its burdens among the residents of Atlanta. The original injustices and hardships inherited from their dismissal disproportionately fell on already marginalized communities of Atlanta, particularly low-income people of color. This population has been victim to not only epistemic injustice but also structural and systemic violence, which demands other forms of remedy beyond the politics of memory.

All Atlantans bear a collective responsibility to address and redress the injustices of the past since we all inherit the benefits and burdens of the past. In the words of Thomas McCarthy, the history and meaning of the Chattahoochee brick as a material archive of racial violence "is not a matter of collective guilt but of collective responsibility" and the reparations it demands "is not a matter of collective punishment but of collective liability."[157] We must also demand political accountability, as the local and state government surrendered political responsibility, serving as an instrument of corporate greed. In large part, the work that activists in Atlanta have been conducting addresses this latter demand. Present-day activism on behalf of the injustice

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[155] Booth, "The Work of Memory," 242.
[156] Zbigniew Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*, trans. John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter (New York, NY: Ecco Press, 1985), 65.
[157] McCarthy, "Coming to Terms with Our Past, Part II," 758.

committed by the company has largely been organized by the Descendants of the Chattahoochee Brick Company Coalition, led by Donna Stephens. After years of mobilizing residents around the history and development attempts of the abandoned brickyards, the Georgia Trust recognized the area as a sacred site.[158]

It is not merely sufficient for the myth's perpetrators or their present benefactors to learn about this history and simply feel remorse, but rather they have a moral obligation to repair the victims' situation, to prevent the continuing harm of systematic suffering. This is why commemorative justice consists of two complementary faces: one bearing witness to the past and the other seeking future remedy for the victim. Justice cannot be achieved without a commitment to both moral imperatives. Although the latter obligation, the duty to redress the present effects of injustice, may seem to outshine the first in want and significance, the operation of commemorative justice depends largely on the former obligation. This is because the work of breaking the myth, disentangling its barbs from the collective memory and social identity, occurs in the first stage of commemorative justice.

This is much easier said than done and requires careful and critical engagement with the master narrative of history, questioning the motivations, implications, and counterhistories underlying a particular point of 'progress.' I argue that a genealogy, like the one I have conducted on the Chattahoochee brick throughout Atlanta, accomplishes this. In contrast to the traditional historical discipline, which begins its investigation at the origins, attempting to carefully record the exact details of the past to construct some historical continuity around some value or ideal, the genealogy starts with what Saidiya Hartman calls the "asterisk in the grand

[158] Jordan, Kelly. "Sacred Site Ceremony – Chattahoochee Brick Company Site – April 3, 2021." *SaportaReport*, April 8, 2021. https://saportareport.com/sacred-site-ceremony-chattahoochee-brick-company-site-april-3-2021/columnists/kellyjordan/kelly/.

narrative of history," or the Black counter-memory.[159] By starting with the asterisk, the genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick breaks the myth, exposing the contradiction between the promise and its repercussions. Instead of locating declarations of progress as points within a contingent historical linearity, the genealogy challenges the substance of these claims, ultimately exposing them as smokescreens for capital and racial violence. Problematizing points of historical progress, the genealogy of the Chattahoochee brick instead exposes a historical continuity of racial terror and exploitation.

The genealogy of collective memory separates the myth of history, accomplishing what Barthes calls the denaturalization of the myth from the history it has defined. The key to breaking the myth lies in the black counter-memory, the "asterisk" of history that had been continually neglected and thrown to the margins of the collective memory because it contradicted the master narrative. Therefore, it is no coincidence that these counter-memories are often the sites of collective amnesia. Deprived of the most powerful instrument of demystification, residents fail to recognize the continuity of racial violence hidden by the myth and are thus stripped of political agency. The genealogy of Chattahoochee brick liberates the collective memory and contemporary identity of Atlanta from the New South myth of progress, revealing a demystified past that will uncover the necessary reparations for victims. According to the wisdom of Orwell's Ingsoc, placing the control of the past in the hands of the public empowers the residents of Atlanta to shape the future.

However, the work of the genealogy will not matter if it is not widely consumed. The work of demystification occurs in the dissonant relation between the genealogy and the collective memory. The genealogy is a mere instrument of demystification; the real work of denaturalizing the New South myth requires the instrument's widespread exercise within the

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159 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.

proper context: the collective memory. Just like a teapot on display at a museum, if the genealogy is relegated to the depths of academia, inaccessible to the public, it will never achieve its intended function. In practical use, a teapot functions to hold and serve tea, but when it is consigned to sit on display, its purpose transforms to be something merely observed and admired. Conducted with the intended function of consciousness-raising and action, the genealogy of Chattahoochee brick loses its power when it is only accessible to a limited population of academic scholars. Therefore, in order to effectuate commemorative justice, this genealogy must not only be widely accessible but also inescapable. It must compete and prevail beyond the New South myth, which has naturalized itself within our history, identity, and the built environment.

This intimidating task can be addressed by insinuating this genealogy, the lost history and meaning of the Chattahoochee brick within the public landscape. Marking the landscape with this forgotten history forces residents who have fallen victim to public amnesia to reassess the materials of the built environment they have previously taken for granted. This meaning of the brick as a material archive of racial violence is inextricably bound to its materiality, and in order to bear witness to this history, we must do so *in situ*. In other words, the materiality, the ubiquity, and the location of the brick offer deeper meaning to its history, contextualizing the previously unperceived material within the built environment.

The genealogy of the brick informs the collective memory, but it is an entirely different experience to interact with and bear witness to its materiality. The very same brick that contains the bones and ashes and DNA of Black bodies fortifies office buildings, apartments, and so much more throughout Atlanta. The brick's materiality makes obvious what was previously unrecognized. Trace the brick, and your hands will find finger-like impressions, clues to the existence of those forced to make and die for it. The brick's materiality, as evidence of social and

corporeal death, attests to the injustices which have transpired. As noted by poet M. NourbeSe Philip, when the master historical narrative attempts to silence these Black counter-memories, "the bones" within the bricks "actually ground you."[160]

To bear witness to and experience the pervasive Chattahoochee brick as a material archive of racial terror is hard and often painful work, which is made even more raw knowing that we cannot know the entire history or reverse these wrongs. All that we can do is listen to the silences of history, hoping to uncover forgotten stories and "refashion the disfigured lives" to something beyond a story of Black violence, terror, and death. This impossible goal is what Saidiya Hartman famously calls the "incomplete project of freedom," which she defines as "a history of the present [that] strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead."[161] The incomplete project of freedom demands a collective responsibility to defend the dead, to understand how their lives (and death) continue to influence the present.

The incompleteness of freedom raises issues in the case of memorialization. How can one commemorate the history of injustice in which its harms are still unfolding? Instead of imagining monuments and memorials as endpoints in history, the Monument Lab suggests that they should be recognized as "touchstones between generations."[162] These "touchstones" do not mark the victory over history, implying a definite end to the continuity of racial violence and exploitation, but rather recognize our existence in what Christina Sharpe calls living "in the wake" of historical injustice. Just like how a boat leaves waves in its wake, Sharpe argues that we find ourselves today in the wake of slavery "living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and

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[160] Patricia Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2, (2008), 69.

[161] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

[162] Laurie Allen, Paul, Farber, and Sue Mobley, *National Monument Audit*, Monument Lab, 2021. https://monumentlab.com/monumentlab-nationalmonumentaudit.pdf.

geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased."[163] To live in the wake is an act of resistance against the dominant narrative which has appointed itself as 'post-racial.'

So how can memorials highlight or complement the experience of living in the wake as a practice of the incomplete project of freedom? I argue that the memorialization of the Chattahoochee brick must not only protect against forgetting and imbue the public space with the remembrance of its meaning but also demonstrate how history lives with us in the present. This task demands mass memorialization, inscribing all sites containing Chattahoochee brick with their forgotten history and meaning. Living in the wake means interacting with these artifacts of racial violence that fill the city, to acknowledge how the lives of the dead continue to influence the experience of the living. Memorialization in the wake must reflect the evolving nature of injustice and highlight how this history lives in the present.

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[163] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 15.

Conclusion

> Nor shall this peace sleep with her; but as when
> The bird of wonder dies, the maiden phoenix,
> Her ashes new create another heir
> As great in admiration as herself;
> So shall she leave her blessedness to one,
> When heaven shall call her from this cloud of darkness,
> Who from the sacred ashes of her honour
> Shall star-like rise as great in fame as she was,
> And so stand fix'd - William Shakespeare[164]
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> Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke
> your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the
> stones will cry out." - Luke 19:39-40

The myth of the Phoenix is a tale as old as time. As the fable goes, the Phoenix was an eagle-like bird with a beautiful plumage of red and gold. As its end approached, the Phoenix forged a nest with twigs and aromatic spices, which spontaneously combusted, consuming the dying creature in its flames. From the pyre, the Phoenix miraculously emerged young and restored. This cleansing fire purged the creature of sin and decay, leaving a new, better replacement in the ashes of the old.[165]

The symbol of the Phoenix resonated deeply with Atlanta, a city that too rose from the ashes of the old. The fire set by General Sherman and his troops cleansed Atlanta of its past and served as the impetus for its glorious rebirth. Liberated from the sins of the Confederacy, Atlanta would rise better and brighter as the capital of the New South. And Atlanta did indeed rise from the ashes, brick by brick. By using Chattahoochee brick to rebuild the city, Atlanta ironically

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[164] William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, act 5, scene 5, 3423-31.
[165] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Phoenix," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 14, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Phoenix-Greek-mythology.

rose from ashes *with* ashes. Although the rise of the city symbolizes the rebirth of Atlanta, the materials of its resurrection are inscribed by death.

The Phoenix as an allegory of immortality and resurrection was the perfect symbol for the city of progress and hope against all odds. In 1887, Atlanta adopted a new city seal, prominently featuring the Phoenix, which straddles the years 1847 and 1865, a memorial for the life and death of antebellum Atlanta. Engraved on the top of the emblem is the city's motto, *resurgens*, which is Latin for 'rise again' or 'rise from the dead.' Ironically, the city rose from the dead with the dead, forging its progressive legacy with every brick of the material archive of racial violence and exploitation.

Unlike the mythic creature, Sherman's cleansing fire did not absolve Atlanta of its past sins. In fact, although they were presumed to have died along with the Old South, the sins of racism and greed were reborn with the city. The miraculous resurrection of the city disguised these vices as virtues of progress and modern capitalism. Distorted by the New South myth of progress, the original meaning of the Chattahoochee brick went unrecognized in the eyes of residents. However, genealogical analysis reveals and lays bare the true meaning of the brick as a material archive of racial violence, as a material contradiction to the abstract myth that constructs the identity and public memory of Atlantans. In terms of accuracy, the brick, a site of contested knowledge and forgotten pain, is a far more authentic symbol of Atlanta's history than the regal Phoenix. Atlanta did not simply rise from its ashes, but rather, from the ashes of the Black bodies, of the historical and continuing victims of the city's particular 'race-neutral' flavor of white supremacy.

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The controversial historical revisionism argued in *Mortar and Myth* faces inevitable challenges, especially amidst the contemporary battle over the nation's history. In recent years, the collective resistance to the Confederate memorial landscape that spans the United States sparked questions in the public discourse concerning the power of historical memory. The nation's built environment and shared spaces are dominated by monuments celebrating the life and legacy of elite White males. According to the Monument Lab's National Monument Audit, half of the fifty most-celebrated individuals throughout the memorial landscape enslaved other people.[166] Whose memory is chosen to be memorialized and whose is silenced is not accidental. Monuments stand as official and permanent markers within the public space, dictating which versions of history shall survive and continue to shape the future public memory.

The commemorative landscape reflects what James Booth calls the "state memory," which indicates the version of history recognized and sponsored by the government. The state memory produces a pre-digested version of our complex history, celebrating moments and figures that reflect our nation's foundational values and dismissing that which reflects poorly on the nation's history. As I have demonstrated through the genealogy of Chattahoochee brick, the institutions which played a pivotal role in the successful development of the nation's political economy are often antithetical to the foundational values of equality, freedom, and progress. Thus, the state faces a dilemma in the construction of the historical memory: either admit the historical failures to abide by these values or reframe history so as to erase from the public memory this contradiction between the nation's aspirations and practices. The former option requires an official admission of defeat and failure to protect our most vulnerable populations, directly undercutting the popular sentiment of American Exceptionalism. It is clear from analysis

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[166] Laurie Allen, Paul, Farber, and Sue Mobley, *National Monument Audit,* 17.

of the contents of the nation's commemorative landscape that the latter option was far more seductive for the gatekeepers of the state memory.[167]

If a person with no prior knowledge of the United States' history were to visit these sites of celebrated moments, movements, and figures, they would leave with a strong grasp of the successes of American governance and spirit. If instances of national failures, such as slavery or the convict leasing system, were to be mentioned at all, they would be represented as mere 'mistakes' along the path towards inevitable progress. Yet, as I have argued before, these moral failures were not mere aberrations of an otherwise progressive history but rather were foundational in the development of the United States. By privileging the sanitized version of American history, one dictated by the revised legacy of White, land-owning men, as the 'official' history to occupy and contextualize the public space, the state makes a striking declaration of whose memories do and do not belong. The function of the state memory, how certain events and figures are represented to stand in broad daylight, lies squarely in the domain of power. The Black counter-memory is thus exiled from the state memory and the shared space, depriving future generations of the instruments to contend this power and demand reparations. This becomes painfully clear when we look at the commemorative landscape of Georgia. In a state with the largest monument to the Confederate cause and veterans, Stone Mountain, no such memorial exists to bear witness to the tragic history of the Chattahoochee brick that spans the state.

The commemorative landscape is not the only instrument of state memory and power. Most notably, the public education system and the curriculum it espouses have always been a site of contested power. For the large percentage of Americans unable to afford or attend a private education institution, public schooling is their only option for primary education. Thus, with the

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[167] *Id.*

power to determine the public curriculum up to the states, the state memory holds captive approximately 50.1 million impressionable minds, whose ability to consume and regurgitate the chosen curriculum determines their educational success and advancement.[168] What histories are and are not selected as a part of the curriculum shapes the identity and ideology of future generations of Americans who will eventually comprise the electorate. Depriving students of knowledge of the gross historical injustices authorized by the law and how they continue to influence the present, the ruling class ensures its future survival.

This is why the debates over teaching critical race theory in public education have been such a hotly-contested issue and why legislatures across the nation are anxious to prohibit its use in the classroom. Critical race theory, or CRT, is an academic concept that emerged from a legal analytic framework in the 1970s and early 1980s developed by legal scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Derrick Bell, among others. The central tenet of CRT is that racism is a social construct, which is embedded in and perpetuated by legal systems and social institutions. Critics of CRT characterize this framework as a divisive discourse that focuses on the negative aspects of American history, ultimately serving as a means to guilt White students for their born identity. Ultimately, although CRT is an effort to increase understanding of and combat racism, critics portray the framework as an attempt to discriminate against White children for their inherited benefit from racism. Much of this debate springs not from fact but from fear. The popular fear that White students will be exposed to demoralizing ideas, and the less obvious but more salient fear that the state's domain over the historical memory taught in schools is at risk.

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[168] Based on a federal projection for the 2022 school year. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 1998-99 through 2018-19; and National Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity Projection Model, 1972 through 2029. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_203.60.asp

The contemporary debate over CRT in public education emerges from questions of how we ought to teach about race and racism in a 'post-racial' society. The answer was obvious for Chief Justice John Roberts, who famously concluded his opinion in a 2007 U.S. Supreme Court case concerning the use of race in public school assignments: "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." For Chief Justice Roberts, "discriminating on the basis of race" meant recognizing the disparate treatment of the races. In a 'post-racial' society, all that is necessary for the ultimate victory over racist discrimination and the establishment of equal opportunity is a wholesale rejection of the notion of race. Conversely, champions of CRT reject the idealistic visions of a 'post-racial' society, arguing that racism is embedded in the foundations of our nation and continues to inflict damage and incur benefits on the basis of race, even if it is less obvious now than it once was. For example, even though the policies that condoned the convict leasing system were facially 'race-neutral,' they were disproportionately enforced on the Black Southern population. Similarly, to *Mortar and Myth*, critical race theory seeks to place the history and continuing effects of the institution of slavery and the Black counter-memory at the center of American history.

With the ultimate goal of critical race theory to shift the social power relations, it is clear why those in power are anxious to oppose the framework's implementation in the nation's classrooms. Efforts to restrict education on race, racism, and the contributions of marginalized populations to United States history span 36 states, including Georgia.[169] At the beginning of the 2022 legislative session, Representative Brad Thomas, a Republican representing Holly Springs, introduced House Bill 888, which seeks to dispel "the idea that the United States and its

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[169] Cathryn Stout and Thomas Wilburn, "CRT Map: Critical Race Theory Legislation and Schools," *Chalkbeat*. Chalkbeat, February 2, 2022. https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism.

institutions are systemically racist" and refutes "the notion that slavery, racial discrimination under the law, and racism should be at the center of" public education.[170] If passed, H.B. 888 would not only prevent educators from teaching about the history and evolution of enslavement, dispossession, and discrimination but also predicates school funding on adherence to this law. The bill's implications for my project are obvious. Under the enforcement of H.B. 888, the genealogy of Chattahoochee brick that I have conducted throughout this thesis could never be taught in Georgia's classrooms. How could an educator truthfully teach the history of a state and nation built on the legacy of enslavement without mentioning race? Supporters of anti-CRT legislation contend that they are protecting students from undue discomfort, but what about the comfort of students of color? Why must the comfort of the White majority always trump the well-documented truth? Might it be that the function of history in the state memory is to maintain the racist power relations that have ruled since the dawn of this nation, to indoctrinate the public with a history favorable to those in power and deem any counter-history invisible? Is that not the exact function of the New South myth of progress—to maintain racial subordination and exploitation while consoling the White conscience?

The contemporary debate over which histories are to be taught and celebrated and which are to be silenced and forgotten in large part inspired me to conduct the genealogy of Chattahoochee brick. I was infuriated by these widespread attempts to whitewash history, absolving the nation from the sins of the past only to inevitably repeat them. As a product of the Texas public education system, I know firsthand the dangers of the state-imposed historical narrative. Therefore, the present attempts to censure educators for teaching history accurately were deeply personal to me. What finally broke the haze of white-hot rage and growing hopelessness was, oddly enough, the popular assertion among critics of CRT that the United

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[170] H. Res. 888, Reg. Sess. 2021-2022 (GA, 2022), 2, https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/61099.

States was not founded on racism. This battle over what actually constituted the 'foundations' of American democracy sparked my interest and provided a productive outlet for my frustration. If legislators in Georgia refused to admit the pivotal role of racism and white supremacy in our governance, then I was resolved to prove that the literal, *material* foundation of the state's political hub was inscribed by racial violence and exploitation. The bricks that lay the foundation of Atlanta, that fortify the streets legislators take to arrive at the Gold Dome, that contain traces of Black bodies stolen and exploited for state profits, whose memories have been discarded and forgotten, serve as material evidence of the central role of race in the foundations of our society. How little known this history is among residents of Atlanta, despite its pervasive material reminder, stands as a testament to past attempts to silence this history and why discussion of the history and legacy of racism in the United States is so direly-needed.

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