

Race, Class, and Conspiracy: The Atlanta Child Murders and the 'Atlanta Spirit'

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In 1982, Atlanta stood trial against the world and was found not guilty of alleged racially-motivated killings, conspiracy, and official violence surrounding the Atlanta Child Murders.¹ From July 1979 to May 1981, Atlanta found itself in the midst of a murder frenzy. Thirty Black children, teens, and young adults between the ages of 4 and 28 became victims in a succession of murders. These victims fit the same profile: primarily boys, relatively young, belonging to poor or working-class families, and Black. Fifteen years after the Civil Rights Act, a series of killings in the Atlanta area with victims who looked the same and came from the same areas struck a chord within the Black community; the obvious conclusion was that the killer must have been a member of the Ku Klux Klan or another White nationalist organization attempting to undo the steps towards equality that Atlanta's Black and White citizens had undertaken in the preceding years. The Atlanta Child Murders demonstrated that, in spite of its previous years of progress, the Black mecca had become the most dangerous city for Black children.²

In a case underscored by racial and class identity, Atlanta detectives, attorneys, and local government attempted to ensure that the two-month trial of suspect Wayne Williams was as conveniently color-blind as possible. When the police apprehended and charged Williams, an Atlanta native, Atlanta's Black population was skeptical; they believed that the murders had to be the work of a 'typical' white serial killer— not Wayne Williams because “no Black person would commit such acts.”³ At this time, very few newspapers, if any, published information about the existence of Black serial killers. More common murders, such as through homicides or aggravated assault, transpired in poor Black communities, and the media portrayed such crimes

¹Lewis Grizzard, “Williams Trial Verdict: The City Is Not Guilty,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, March 1, 1982, 2A.

² Maurice J. Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca : Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 98.

³ Ibid, 99.

as 'murder as usual'; thus, the kind of murder series that the world witnessed in the years of 1979 to 1981 had to be the work of a 'typical' White man who had more propensity for being a serial killer than did a Black man. But this case was anything but typical. Wayne Williams was a Black man in his early 20s at the time of the killings, with no prior convictions or criminal history, police found a lack of consistency between many of the methods of murder between victims, and Williams could only be tried on the murder of two men out of the nearly 30 victims. A Black woman attorney defended Williams, a Black judge presided over the case, and a majority-Black jury convicted him to life imprisonment; as far as the trial was concerned, there was certainly no evidence of racist deception.⁴

Regardless of the verdict, the series of killings that came to be collectively known as the Atlanta murders was an issue that extended itself far past homicide in Atlanta's Black community; it signified Atlanta's potential failure as a post-racial society and the unreliability of local police and task forces, local and national government agencies, and news outlets. Individuals such as Venus Taylor, a mother of one of the murdered children, felt that City Hall was "just hoping this would go away because Atlanta is really into its convention image. They should have been doing what they're doing now six months ago."⁵ Sentiments of distrust and impatience permeated the city. While the murders began in 1979, 1980 represented the year that investigators began to regard the cases as a pressing matter. Some speculate that the catalyst for the active police involvement was the November showing of ABC's *20/20*, which addressed the

⁴ Bernard D. Headley, "The 'Atlanta Tragedy' and the Rule of Official Ideology," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies; Bellingham, Wash.* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 21.

⁵ Robert Levey Globe Staff, "A Deadly Rhythm is Challenging Atlantans: [First Edition]," *Boston Globe (Pre-1997 Fulltext); Boston, Mass.*, October 21, 1980, 1.

child murders.⁶ The segment implied that city officials did not respond quickly enough in pursuing the cases of the so far eleven murdered Black children. In response, Grace Davis, president of Atlanta Women Against Crime, criticized that the segment portrayed Atlanta as a city where no one cared. She further argued, “Regardless of color, we care. We don’t want a race issue made out of this,” because the segment implied the murders and lack of response from local police were indicative of systemic racism. Suddenly concerned citizens, especially Black citizens, watched as non-locals donated millions of dollars, renowned detectives visited Atlanta to help solve the case, and celebrities and news outlets publicized the city’s trauma— all after having their apprehensions and suspicions quieted by a local government intent on maintaining the visage of a harmonious New South. Even with the inclusion of the additional resources in pursuing the perpetrator, investigators could not find the murderer.

Atlanta, like many cities in the early 1980’s, found itself unprepared for the prospect of having to investigate, locate, and apprehend a serial killer. Police reported to the media, “the number of children murdered is very unusual for Atlanta,” which is a rather self-evident analysis since Atlanta averaged less than one child homicide per year prior to these murders.⁷ At the time of this 1980 statement, the police had already discovered nine bodies tied to the case of the missing and murdered children, and Atlanta officials approximated that the investigations cost the city \$250,000 per month, with more than half of that amount being drawn from other city budgets.⁸ Luckily, additional financial resources came pouring in from many avenues once

⁶ Carol Reuben, “CRC Seeks Air Time On ‘20/20,’” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, November 20, 1980, E9.

⁷ Evelyn L. Newman, “Committee To Stop Murder Of Children,” *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003); *Atlanta, Ga.*, September 14, 1980, 7.

⁸ Reginald Stuart, “Top Entertainers, in a Benefit Concert, Join Outpouring of Support for; Atlanta,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 1981, sec. U.S.,

Atlanta's tragedy became publicized and its detectives seriously embarked on the journey to find a potential serial killer. For example in 1981, celebrities such as Sammy Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra performed in a ninety-minute benefit concert at the Atlanta Civic Center and raised \$148,000 towards police investigation into the murders.⁹ Famously, Maynard Jackson hosted a news conference in May 1981 in which he offered a \$100,000 cash reward for any tips that provided information that led to the arrest and conviction of the culprit(s) involved in the child murders. Of this amount, the Atlanta City Council contributed \$50,000 and churches, synagogues, businesses, and individuals contributed the rest.¹⁰ The reward brought no significant breaks in the investigation, and figures like Muhammad Ali "sniffed" at the amount, called it "disgraceful" and further added, "That won't even buy a Rolls Royce."¹¹ Ali proceeded to donate \$400,000 to the reward fund, thereby raising the total to \$500,000.

This amount excludes the \$1.5 million that President Ronald Reagan donated in March 1981 towards extraordinary expenses of the investigation.¹² Furthermore, the total donations contributed nationally by concerned citizens and *ad hoc* charity organizations, such as the

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/11/us/top-entertainers-in-a-benefit-concert-join-outpouring-of-support-for-atlanta.html>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Mayor Maynard Jackson Wednesday Ordered the Entire Atlanta Police....," *UPI*, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1980/10/15/Mayor-Maynard-Jackson-Wednesday-ordered-the-entire-Atlanta-police/4445340430400/>.

¹¹ "Atlanta Remembers: How Muhammad Ali Tried to Help Solve the Atlanta Child Murders," *WXIA*, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/local/atlanta-remembers-how-muhammad-ali-tried-to-help-solve-the-atlanta-child-murders/85-235817918>; "Reward Boosted to Half-Million Dollars," *UPI*, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1981/05/09/Reward-boosted-to-half-million-dollars/2102358228800/>.

¹² Wendell Rawls Jr, "Reagan Provides More Aid for Investigation in Atlanta," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1981, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/14/us/reagan-provides-more-aid-for-investigation-in-atlanta.html>. One week prior to this announcement, the Reagan Administration gave Atlanta nearly \$1 million in grants towards education and mental health programs related to the cases. Additionally, Atlanta already received \$1.8 million in federal aid before the announcement, making the total amount given \$3.3 million.

members of the Recording Industry of Philadelphia, who contributed \$2,500; the Florida Home Economics Association, who contributed \$50; the Township of Piscataway, New Jersey, who donated \$839.30; and even inmates who donated whatever they could afford are not added into the total amount that Atlanta received in order to apprehend its killer.¹³ Public Safety Commissioner Lee Brown admitted that Atlanta had a “money issue” in January 1981, and that issue became further exacerbated because, “there was no way to budget for a tragedy.”¹⁴ Atlanta’s tribulations were made public for the nation to judge, and in true hospitality, the nation responded with an outpouring of compassion and financial support. Yet as an unforeseen consequence of the national aid that the city received, some citizens of Atlanta began to critique the ongoing investigation. Later that year in a June 1981 open letter to Mayor Maynard Jackson and fellow citizens, Roy Patterson argued, “All that he [Maynard Jackson] has asked us and others to do has been done; and yet the killings continued.”¹⁵ This examination of the deficiencies of Mayor Jackson and investigators came from a White citizen— a citizen who was not a part of the demographic being attacked, yet recognized that what City Hall said it was doing was drastically different than what was actually being done. Prior to this, in 1980, roughly six noteworthy lieutenants, captains and sergeants from New York, California, Connecticut, and

¹³ Elaine Johnson, “Concerned Members of the Recording Industry of Philadelphia International Records for the APB Investigative Fund,” March 2, 1981, Maynard Jackson Papers: Box 134, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Research Center.; Barbara Benson, “A.P.B. Investigation Fund Donation from Florida Home Economics Association,” August 7, 1981, Maynard Jackson Papers: Box 134, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Research Center.; Robert Smith, “Township of Piscataway, New Jersey Donates Money to Aid Atlanta Investigation and Social Programs for Families,” August 11, 1981, Maynard Jackson Papers: Box 134, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Research Center.; Stuart, “Top Entertainers, in a Benefit Concert, Join Outpouring of Support for; Atlanta.”

¹⁴ Bill Berkeley and Michael Schwartz, “Reagan’s Help Asked in Child Cases,” *Atlanta Journal*, January 28, 1981, 1, Maynard Jackson Papers, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Research Center.

¹⁵ Roy Patterson, “An Open Letter: To The Mayor and Citizens of Atalanta,” *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003); *Atlanta, Ga.*, June 5, 1981, 6.

Michigan travelled to Atlanta to aid the investigation. However, Atlanta citizens suspected that the addition of the detectives was a publicity ploy to deflect attention from the department's failure to solve the cases.¹⁶ While the visiting investigators arrived to help solve the cases, the Atlanta police department placed significant restrictions on them; they could only "brainstorm" motives and potential perpetrators, and they could not conduct street investigations or interrogations. The out-of-state aid proved fruitless, and the detectives returned to their home states a few weeks later with no further progress made in the investigation. It seemed that no one could give answers to the group of citizens being terrorized. As an eventual result, Black Atlantans formed coalitions, protests, and news sources to combat the absence of knowledge surrounding the murders and to answer the question that politicians such as Mayor Maynard Jackson, public safety commissioner Lee Brown, and chief of police George Napper, could not answer: Who was killing Atlanta's children?

Legally, the case ended in 1982 with the trial and conviction of Wayne Williams; socially and culturally, however, the case was never closed. Every few years the case of the Atlanta Child Murders resurfaces and captures media attention: 1985's *The Atlanta Child Murders* miniseries and James Baldwin's book *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 2000's film *Who Killed Atlanta's Children?*, and CNN's 2010 *The Atlanta Child Murders* documentary.¹⁷ With every resurgence, however, viewers found themselves no closer to discovering the truth of the Atlanta Child

¹⁶ Susan Page, "Fear Clenches Atlanta As Children Disappear: Murders Leave Atlanta in Fear Blacks Say Police Response Would Have Been Different If the Dead Had Been White," *Newsday*, November 17, 1980, 11, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1002861272/abstract/9D9951A079D64891PQ/38>.

¹⁷ *The Atlanta Child Murders*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088750/>; "The Evidence of Things Not Seen," <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-evidence.html>; *Who Killed Atlanta's Children? (TV Movie 2000)* - IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0221673/releaseinfo>; "CNN Viewers: Williams 'guilty' in Atlanta Child Murders - CNN.Com," <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/06/11/atlanta.murders.poll.ireport/index.html>.

Murders than they had been in the 1980's. Once again in 2019, the uncertainty of Wayne Williams's conviction and the Atlanta Child Murders has surfaced, and individuals, media outlets, and local government are re-examining their findings from the case. From Netflix documentaries, to podcasts, to Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms reopening the case in early 2019, there is a new organized effort to find who killed Atlanta's youth.¹⁸ The existence of these documentaries and historical dramas contradict the then- members of the police force who "understand the temptation to believe that Mr. Williams is innocent, particularly among African-Americans," and declared, "Wayne Williams is a serial killer, a predator, and he did the bulk of these murders."¹⁹

At the time, the consensus among the majority of Atlantans, black and white, was to preserve the integrity of Atlanta's booming economy and outward social relations in the face of the Atlanta Child Murders. In order to accomplish this goal, officials and news agencies wrote off valid concerns brought up by the Black community— such as the doubt that Williams could be responsible for nearly 30 murders on his own— as fictionalized craze and suppressed information about the killings until the Atlanta Child Murders could no longer be classified as 'murder as usual.' The murders of 1979 to 1981 act as a vehicle for understanding the social and political state of Atlanta during its tenuous transition into a post-racial, progressive New South. An analysis of the Atlanta Child Murders cannot be conducted without the examination of class,

¹⁸ "*Mindhunter* (TV Series)," in *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mindhunter_\(TV_series\)&oldid=928254715](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mindhunter_(TV_series)&oldid=928254715); "Home," Atlanta Monster, <https://atlantamonster.com/>; "Officials Announce New Investigation into Atlanta's Infamous Child Murders," NBC News, March 21, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/atlanta-officials-announce-fresh-investigation-decades-old-child-murder-cases-n985896>.

¹⁹ Audra D. S. Burch, "Who Killed Atlanta's Children?," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/us/atlanta-child-murders.html>.

conspiracy, and race, because the primary victims in this case, poor African-Americans, became casualties to both a rampaging serial killer and a local government acting in its own best interest. The Atlanta Child Murders, rather than an instance of finding *actual* killer(s), represents a case study of what transpires when the state-maintained White power structure is threatened.

“The City Too Busy to Hate to the City Too Busy to Give a Damn”²⁰

On March 9, 1960, a student-led civil rights organization, All-University Student Leadership Group, published a full-page advertisement called “An Appeal for Human Rights” in each of the Atlanta daily newspapers. In response, Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver condemned the students for not recognizing the privilege of a college education as Black citizens and protesting through “unorthodox and unacceptable” methods. In contrast, Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield praised the students’ “promise of nonviolence and peaceful approach,” while declaring Atlanta to be “a city too busy to hate.”²¹ Mayor Ivan Allen followed suit during his mayoral terms and spent millions of dollars in the 1960’s to promote Atlanta as a business-oriented, economically booming, and racially progressive southern city to set itself apart from the racial violence occurring in other southern cities.²² The processes of school desegregation, the creation of committees such as Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, and the reversal of the “Atlanta Wall”—a barrier built to designate white and black

²⁰ Joyce Leviton, “A Grieving Mother Spurs The Hunt For The Child-Killer Who Is Terrorizing Atlanta,” *People* 14, no. 19 (November 10, 1980): 57.

²¹ “WSB-TV Newsfilm Clip of Governor Ernest Vandiver and Mayor William B. Hartsfield Responding to the Full-Page Advertisement ‘An Appeal for Human Rights’ Published in Newspapers by a Student Civil Rights Group in Atlanta, Georgia, 1960 March 9,” accessed October 20, 2019, http://crdl.usg.edu/export/html/ugabma/wsb/crdl_ugabma_wsb_42211.html?Welcome.

²² “Four Things You Should Know about Atlanta | Perspectives on History | AHA,” accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.historians.org/annual-meeting/past-meetings/supplement-to-the-121st-annual-meeting/four-things-you-should-know-about-atlanta>. First, in the 1920’s Mayor Ivan Allen, Sr. implemented the ‘Forward Atlanta’ initiative to solidify Atlanta’s position as the leading city of the South. The idea was to promote Atlanta as the ideal location for new factories and offices by publishing advertisements in newspaper outlets across the country.

living areas— ensured Atlanta’s position as the designated epitome of the New South in contrast to states like Alabama and Mississippi, where news outlets regularly reported public lynchings. The efforts to industrialize Atlanta and foster, or at least appear to foster, social change in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement were a part of rebranding Atlanta as the city too busy to hate.

The rebranding served to legitimize Atlanta as an economic powerhouse devoid of behaviors *and riots* that would otherwise create an environment inhospitable to corporations and families attempting to grow in areas removed from racialized crimes. While Atlanta’s reinvention provided great benefits to businesses and citizens, many found the revamping process to only be surface level. In the words of James Baldwin, “the white city fathers and the then Negro, now black middle class saw eye to eye on one thing, which was that desegregation had to be accomplished with a minimum of drama and a maximum of style,” because, “the city of Atlanta loathed us as much as did the state of Georgia but couldn’t afford to keep lynching us.”²³ However, the rebranding of Atlanta could not prevent the child murders or its resulting racial tensions that brimmed under the surface of progressivism. Reverend Joseph Lowery, president of the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference, acknowledged, “The impression is that it’s open season on poor blacks and brown people,” and a group of Black Vietnam veterans added, “[f]ear is wearing thin, and races are close to combat.”²⁴ The Atlanta Child Murders revealed that Atlanta was not as post-racially developed as it had presented itself to be in newspapers; the tension always existed, but it was subdued in the name of progress. At

²³ James Baldwin, “Atlanta: The Evidence of Things Not Seen,” *Playboy Magazine*, 1981, 2–4, Maynard Jackson Papers: Box 120- Folder 1, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Research Center.

²⁴ Page, “Fear Clenches Atlanta As Children Disappear,” 11.

the time of the Atlanta Child Murders, Georgia was in the midst of its economic boom with Fortune 500 corporations such as Coca-Cola, Cox Communications, and Delta Airlines claiming Atlanta as their home. In order to continue this growth and to have Atlanta maintain an outward-facing visage of progress and success, the 1979-81 murders could not appear to be a part of a potential killing spree. More importantly, it could not appear to be a part of a racialized killing spree, because racism was bad for business.

In consideration of the exponential growth of White-owned industry, the Joint Task Force on Economic Development was formed on October 3, 1978 to aid the 27% of unemployed Black men, aged 22-24 in Atlanta. The 27% unemployment rate was a staggering figure for the Black mecca, especially in comparison to the 0.1% unemployment rate for their white counterparts. Below average skills levels, insufficient access to blue-collar jobs, and an inability for Blacks to move residences freely were cited as issues of underdevelopment. To address these issues, the task force's goals were to encourage educational and training efforts to bolster underemployed populations to capture white-collar jobs, provide support to minority entrepreneurs, revitalize housing and neighborhoods to increase the city's tax base, move potential employees closer to jobs, and attract new business to Atlanta.²⁵ To reiterate, the response to the insufficient access to blue-collar jobs was the implementation of training in white-collar jobs.

Many of the policies that Maynard Jackson and his majority Black local government put in place were to benefit Black middle- and upper-class Atlantans. In *Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics, Class, and the Making of Modern Atlanta*, Maurice Hobbs argues, "The Atlanta Child Murders demonstrate how black popular political sentiments toward Jackson shifted from

²⁵ Tom Bauer, "Synopsis of Existing Studies on Economic Development and Announcing the Establishment of a Joint Task Force on Economic Development," n.d., Maynard Jackson Papers: Box 62- Folder 17, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Research Center.

championing the cause of working and poor to protecting Atlanta's national and international commercial branding."²⁶ Prior to the events of 1979-1981, Atlanta's Black citizens regarded Jackson as an effective and influential politician, but the Jackson administration arguably did little for the working class. Jackson's misfire with solving the problem of poor, Black underemployment proved that even with the addition of a Black mayor and a majority Black local government, there was no fundamental alteration in the "basic governing alignment."²⁷ In other words, Jackson's Atlanta was the same Atlanta government that was based on White hegemony, masquerading itself as a progressive city. Its affirmative action policies targeted minority and women business owners, which greatly increased the municipal contracts for minority companies, but did relatively little for the working class. Additionally, Jackson's most notable actions included the development of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), the construction of the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, and the attempt to address race relations as Atlanta's first Black mayor. Thus, conceivably, the benefits that the poor and working class received were inadvertently a part of the trickle-down effect that accompanied the targeted expansion of local businesses, which aligned with the core values of Atlanta.

Since 1916, the idea of the "Atlanta Spirit" overtook the city and remained in its core values: confidence, cooperation, and constructive attitudes.²⁸ In sum, the "Atlanta Spirit" was a means to foster economic and business development in order to present the city as an economic powerhouse while crafting Atlanta to be "a city worth while" in terms of culture, economy, and

²⁶ Maurice J. Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca : Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 96.

²⁷ Clarence N. Stone, "Reflections on Regime Politics: From Governing Coalition to Urban Political Order," *Urban Affairs Review* 51, no. 1 (January 2015): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087414558948>.

²⁸ Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, "What Is the Atlanta Spirit?," *The City Builder*, March 10, 1916, 8.

infrastructure. *The City Builder*, Atlanta's business newspaper, coined the term "Atlanta Spirit" in its first issue to emphasize the city's attention to the visual, intellectual, artistic, moral, and industrial growth of "our people."²⁹ The Civil Rights Act had not passed at that time, so the preservation of "our people" would have primarily meant White people rather than all Atlantans. The 'Atlanta Spirit' created uniformity and like-mindedness amongst Atlanta's white population; if it was good for business, then it was good for Atlanta. In 1916, cooperation meant creating a distinct Atlanta identity that was based on cultural artifacts and industrialization centered around the railroad and transportation. The subtext of the 'Atlanta Spirit' transformed as the city's population grew exponentially and Blacks gained higher positions in Atlanta society. By the 1970's the cooperation aspect of the identity came to mean perceived collaboration across color lines. Not only did Atlanta's White and minority populations benefit socially and economically from the alliance, but it also made good press. In the 1971 issue of *Ebony Magazine*, Phyl Garland wrote, "In Atlanta, black folks have more, live better, accomplish more and deal with whites more effectively than they do anywhere else in the South— or North," as a result of its "massive face-lifting job" to transform Atlanta into an exemplary symbol of the "New South."³⁰ Thus, in recognition of the city's economic and social prosperity for its Black population, Atlanta became the new home of the Black mecca.

Only three cities have been formally declared Black meccas throughout history: Harlem, New York; Houston, Texas; and Atlanta, Georgia. To clarify, the meaning of "mecca" is simply a place regarded as a center for a specified group, activity, or interest rather than the Muslim holy city. The definition of Black mecca followed the theme of 'Black excellence' across fields

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Phyl Garland, "Atlanta: Black Mecca of the South," *Ebony Magazine*, August 1971, 152.

such as education, politics, Black capitalism, home ownership, and media, and it mainly existed to attract distinguished Black professionals and middle-class families. Atlanta was the epicenter of African-American prosperity.³¹ The city maintained the largest Black middle-class population in the United States, which grew by 84% in the 1990's, and the income for Black Atlanta residents grew faster than for Blacks nationwide. Atlanta was also home to the four historically Black colleges that made up the Atlanta University Center Consortium: Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and the Morehouse School of Medicine. The 1971 article officially recognized the economic and educational efforts of Atlanta and named it the Black mecca of the South—a status it has maintained throughout the years. The 1973 election of Atlanta's first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, along with Atlanta's majority Black biracial government further cemented the Black mecca status.

In an article for *The Atlanta Constitution*, Tom Walker asserted, "Atlanta's racial climate is obviously important to its business and economic fortunes," because it related to how well Atlanta was able to attract new industry, which was its "image factor."³² Atlanta's tactfully chosen portrayal of a post-racial New South paired well with its designation as the Black mecca because both its White and Black populations benefited economically and socially from the tourism and publicity that the labeling provided. Atlanta's strength was its integration. The same *Ebony Magazine* article that declared Atlanta the Black mecca acknowledged the deficiencies of Atlanta in terms of its poor and working-class populations, but those concessions were brief and uncritical because, "Certainly, problems here are no worse than those encountered in many a

³¹ Terry Williams, "Money Talks," *Atlanta Magazine*, March 2003, 82.

³² Tom Walker, "Economy, Race Mix in Atlanta," *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*; *Atlanta, Ga.*, September 20, 1981, 1J.

Northern metropolis where blacks have less hanging in the balance.”³³ On one hand, Atlanta had one of the highest unemployment rates for Black men in the 22-24 age group when compared nationally; yet, in the same breath, it was the Black mecca of the United States in the 1970’s because of the economic power of its Black middle-class. *Ebony Magazine* asserted that Atlanta’s poor, Black population had no reason to complain because their experience was comparable to the experience of most other Black citizens in the United States; the difference was that Atlanta was a racially integrated city where African Americans had the opportunities to succeed. Giving the city its Black mecca status ensured that its working-class would not be uplifted socially or economically. Advances for middle-class and affluent Black Atlantans translated as advances for the entirety of the Black community, meaning that issues that the working class faced in a city where their prosperous counterparts succeeded became non-issues in order to preserve the integrity and image of an integrated Atlanta. Opening a murder case did not just mean the nation’s disillusion with the Black mecca ideology, it meant that the disparities between Atlanta’s Black and White population could be further prodded— especially because the group affected, poor Blacks, did not fit into the Black mecca narrative that Atlanta’s White and middle-class Blacks pushed. Atlanta was the “town that taught a nation how to live,” but respectability politics and a pretense of racial harmony could no longer protect the city’s crumbling image.³⁴

Arguably, the city’s attempt to protect its image in the face of travesty and bad press came at the cost of the most important victims of the Atlanta Murders: the children and groups of people who tasked themselves with their protection. Police found the body of Yusuf Bell, age 9,

³³ Garland, “Atlanta: Black Mecca of the South,” 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

in November 1979, in an abandoned school building. He had been strangled to death. His elderly next-door neighbor had offered him 17 cents to go to the store and do some shopping for her, and Yusuf agreed. That was the last time Camille Bell saw her son alive.³⁵ For some time, the slayings of at least six Black boys went reported by families yet publicly unnoticed— until Camille Bell took to the streets in protest of the lack of interest that police and City Hall showed in crimes against poor, Black children.³⁶ Bell speculated that had she and her son been White or middle-class Blacks, then the police would have responded to her concerns sooner. She affirmed, “Poor people tend not to have as much value as people with power and influence and money.”³⁷ Witnessing the inaction of the police firsthand, Camille Bell, well versed in activism and protest through her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, began grassroots organizing. Bell contacted other mothers of missing and murdered children only to discover that police, although promising to keep in touch, never followed up with the families of victims. The Committee to Stop Children’s Murders (STOP Committee) began its inception with Camille Bell at its helm, and its purpose was to create a child-conscious society by encouraging interactions between neighbors and “getting into everyone’s business.”³⁸ Bell illustrated the importance of this sentiment, “When I was a little girl and I would cross the street when I knew I wasn’t supposed to, there was always somebody there to mind my business for me and to tell my mother. Now, where are these people? They’re living in [high]-rises and feeling unwanted by society.”³⁹ The

³⁵ Joyce Leviton, “A Grieving Mother Spurs The Hunt For The Child-Killer Who Is Terrorizing Atlanta,” *People* 14, no. 19 (November 10, 1980): 57.

³⁶ Bill Shipp, “Who Is Killing The Ghetto Black Kids?,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984); Atlanta, Ga.*, August 8, 1980.

³⁷ Paul Mokrzycki Renfro, “‘The City Too Busy to Care’: The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Southern Past, 1979-81,” *Southern Cultures* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 58.

³⁸ Leviton, “A Grieving Mother Spurs The Hunt For The Child-Killer Who Is Terrorizing Atlanta,” 57.

³⁹ Susan Clarke, “Could Horrors Of Atlanta Happen Here?,” *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981), City Edition; Pittsburgh, Pa.*, November 29, 1980, 4.

STOP Committee recognized that neighbors had an advantage in the surveillance of their community because neighbors knew how to better discern irregularities within their neighborhoods than the police force. This was especially essential at the time, because there were few leads in the case and the STOP Committee speculated that the killer could be a Black man due to how well the perpetrator entered neighborhoods and abducted children while arousing little to no suspicion.⁴⁰ The organization's intent, like many others that were created in the same vain, was to foster Black agency and to create a concrete solidarity amongst fellow poor and Black Atlantans while living in the liminal space that was the Old South in the guise of the 'post-racial,' industrialized Atlanta during the Child Murders.

The STOP Committee's formation was a protest directed towards Atlanta police and government officials. Camille Bell and other members of the STOP committee were highly critical of the police and their local government, first for how they responded to the reports of the missing children, and second for the amount of time that passed before police began actively investigating the cases. Bell speculated, "When a ghetto child is missing the first response is generally to say, 'It's just a runaway.'"⁴¹ Which proved to be more than speculation since newspaper outlets and public officials, during the rare occasions on which they spoke of the victims, portrayed them as "hustlers and runaways."⁴² Describing the victims as "hustlers and runaways" served to both transform the public perception of the children into criminal adults, and also allude to the idea that their deaths were deserved. By treating the young children as hardened criminals, the frequency and implications of their deaths went unnoticed outside of the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴¹ Eugene Robinson, "Atlanta Mothers Call for Rally Here," *Washington Post*, May 1, 1981, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/05/01/atlanta-mothers-call-for-rally-here/a29a5962-c60f-445c-88b0-6771d1ea2672/>.

⁴² Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 97.1

Black community. After receiving backlash from the Black community, newspapers eventually halted their publications of the warped narratives of the victims, but some question how much sooner the killer would have been found if the false portrayals would have never been made.

Notably it was Bell and her Committee who first recognized the pattern of a serial killer— not the police. Just before the Atlanta police department publicly speculated potential ties between cases, Bell informed them of the pattern she had recognized; then she theorized, “there would be another child murdered that week.”⁴³ Bell’s theory proved correct, and the body of Clifford Jones was found later that same week. Bell and fellow parents believed that the city leaped into action and finally formed a task force in Fall 1980 because Jones was visiting Atlanta from Cleveland, Ohio. His death, and subsequently the deaths of the other victims, were reported in Ohio newspapers, and, “The publicity threatened to affect Atlanta’s national reputation and its extensive convention business.”⁴⁴ In previous years, Atlanta had issues with race and conventions not mixing well together, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta saw “signs of weakness” and “perceived the start of an economic downturn” in the Southeast region’s economy in 1979.⁴⁵ Atlanta’s economy grew because of the steps it took in constructing and maintaining its image as a convention city, including its addition of attractions within the city, expansion of nightlife, and development of its transportation system. Atlanta was in competition with states like New York to attract visitors and, more importantly, money to its city; bad

⁴³ Newman, “Committee To Stop Murder Of Children,” 7.

⁴⁴ Page, “Fear Clenches Atlanta As Children Disappear,” 11.

⁴⁵ Bill Shipp, “Who Is Killing The Ghetto Black Kids?,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*; *Atlanta, Ga.*, August 8, 1980, 4A. An out-of-town conventioneer had been shot in the streets in 1979, and attitudes were hostile because the White business community felt the Black administration was insensitive to criminal acts committed against them; Shipp, “Who Is Killing The Ghetto Black Kids?,” 4A; Hesse, “Atlanta Fed Sees ‘Weakness’ In Economy Of Southeast,” 11D.

publicity, such as being the “capital of fear,” negated its progress and potentially hastened an economic downturn.⁴⁶

Police chief George Napper and Public Safety Commissioner Lee Brown refuted the hypothesis that Atlanta’s police department and City Hall were slow to react to the murders because of economic interests. While the reasoning for the sluggish investigation cannot be confirmed, it is undeniable that the police took too long to respond. Investigator Mike Edwards, a former deputy director of the city police criminal investigations division and head of a private investigative agency, discerned, “The biggest problem the department has is recognizing that they have a real problem.” He further rationalized, “If they had done as much as they could do in July, it stands to reason they wouldn’t have done anything yesterday.”⁴⁷ Atlanta saw an unprecedented number of child murders in a short time frame but delayed launching a massive investigation, thereby allowing many cases to go cold. While the police department had no reason to believe that the first few child murders connected to a larger killing spree, Edward surmised, “The worst thing that could have happened is more men would be assigned to the case than needed to be.”⁴⁸ Instead, the police department waited, the frequency of the murders increased, and the case was more difficult to solve.

Bell and other members of the STOP Committee not only enacted a national campaign exposing the negligence of the Atlanta police department, but they also called out their Black local government representatives.⁴⁹ Bell asserted, “Black politicians are nowhere to be found

⁴⁶ Atlanta Constitution Special Correspondents, “International Cities Perceive Atlanta as ‘the Capital of Fear,’” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, March 15, 1981, 10A.

⁴⁷ Clem Richardson, “Police Draw Flak In City’s String Of Child Killings,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, August 24, 1980, 8B.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8B.

⁴⁹ Clarke, “Could Horrors Of Atlanta Happen Here?,” 1. Newspaper from the Pittsburgh Courier. The STOP Committee visited to “establish precautionary methods” to ensure that other cities would not become another

now, but they knew where to find poor blacks when they needed the votes.”⁵⁰ Bell reflected the discontent that the majority of the poor, Black community experienced; the constituents that they voted into office had effectively turned their backs on them. The STOP Committee provided damning evidence against the Atlanta local government that was further validated by visiting investigators who felt that the case should have been seriously investigated earlier. The city’s image was slipping; Atlanta, the city too busy to hate, became Atlanta, “the burg too bungling to protect its young’uns.”⁵¹ Atlanta had an image to protect, and the way to protect it was by dismantling the platform of its naysayers. The non-profit organization was supported solely by private contributions.⁵² Every donation to the organization, outgoing payment towards funeral costs for murdered children, and disbursement of compensation to the families of victims opened the STOP Committee up to inquiry from the Atlanta government.

The STOP committee received donations on behalf of the families of missing and murdered children because of the city’s refusal to properly investigate the case within the first year of the murders. After the child murders dominated national and international headlines, Mayor Maynard Jackson declared in 1981 that there was only one authorized organization that would be accepting donations on behalf of the families, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s (SCLC) Children and Families Fund. It consisted of a four-member panel that oversaw funds donated for the victims’ families, and it distributed funds to families according to familial need. State Representative Tyrone Brooks supported the designation of a sole

Atlanta. Bell spoke, “[We] noticed that nobody in the law enforcement positions of Atlanta was saying to the people of the city about the fact that young black children were being abducted.”

⁵⁰ Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 105.

⁵¹ Jack Tarver, “Stigma of Crime Follows Atlanta in World’s View,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, June 14, 1981, 1D.

⁵² “An Appeal from The Committee To Stop Children’s Murders,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 4, no. 2 (1980): 134, <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.0.0082>.

fundraising authority by saying, “Money hungry shysters, and political prostitutes are using the deaths of our children to raise funds for themselves, their organizations, and even in some cases, their churches.”⁵³ In response, Bell declared, “No one has the right or authority to collect funds for our concerns... The families do not need a panel to decide what we need.”⁵⁴ By creating an ‘official’ fund for donations, Mayor Jackson robbed the STOP Committee of its autonomy and its ability to combat the city that had ignored their concerns at the beginning of the murders. With this ‘official,’ city-backed fund, there should have been no need for other organizations to collect money, regardless if its members were mothers of murdered children. Not only did the creation of a ‘legitimate’ fundraising organization funnel money away from the Committee, which covered most of its expenses by donations, but it was the first step in the delegitimization of the STOP Committee.

The next month in April 1981, the SCLC stopped taking donations for the children’s fund, having received \$31, 259, and Citizens and Trust Bank issued an audit report on behalf of the panel.⁵⁵ Dr. Tim Ryles, head of the Office of Consumer Affairs, sought a subpoena for the fundraising records of the STOP Committee. The transparency from the SCLC fundraising feasibly provided justification for an audit from the STOP Committee to examine the amount of money they received in donations and how they spent it. The group’s inexperience with running a non-profit would serve as ammunition for the state and prove to be its downfall. The quarterly reports of 1980-1981 indicated that the STOP Committee collected nearly \$40,000, with half

⁵³ “Two Funds Proposed to Aid Children’s Families: Rep. Brooks Says Bar Soliciting,” *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003); *Atlanta, Ga.*, March 6, 1981, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Vincent Mccraw, “SCLC Children’s Fund Will Terminate, April,” *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003); *Atlanta, Ga.*, April 2, 1981, 1.

being paid to the families of the missing and murdered children.⁵⁶ Riles had “had it with [the] STOP” Committee because they “repeatedly violated the law.”⁵⁷ Columnists called it “big business without controls,” which invited “scorn and tough questions.”⁵⁸ Georgia law required that a minimum of 70% of donations go towards their charitable purposes and that the other, at most, 30% go towards administrative costs; additionally, organizations such as the STOP Committee were required to submit annual audits of its charitable operations.⁵⁹ If the organization was found to be using its donations for profit, then it would be fined and criminal action would be taken. The Committee provided its financial data to the government, and its expenses appeared to be falsified. The mothers of missing and murdered children were given two options: disband or face criminal charges and jail time. Thus, in 1981, the STOP Committee met its demise at the hands of Black and White Atlanta officials— perhaps because of the ways in which the Committee challenged the public image that Atlanta’s officials had established for itself and its Black population.

The Atlanta Child Murders represented many things for the Black community: the end of understanding Atlanta as the ‘Black mecca’ and, primarily, a need for Black solidarity. The kind of Black solidarity needed, however, was an alliance of Black Atlantans across class lines. Regardless of this need, tensions between Atlanta’s middle-class City Hall representatives and its poor Blacks demonstrated that class solidarity superseded racial solidarity when money was

⁵⁶ William Cotterell, “Subpoena May Be Sought To Get Mothers’ Records; More Indictments On Suspect Seen: Bank Records Sought,” *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003); *Atlanta, Ga.*, July 21, 1981, 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁸ “Mrs. Camille Bell and The Committee to Stop Children’s...,” *UPI*, accessed October 27, 2019, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1981/05/16/Mrs-Camille-Bell-and-The-Committee-to-Stop-Childrens/7837358833600/>.

⁵⁹ Cotterell, “Subpoena May Be Sought To Get Mothers’ Records; More Indictments On Suspect Seen: Bank Records Sought,” 2.

involved. The period from 1979-1981 reflected anything but the “City Too Busy to Hate” that Atlanta had advertised for its Black citizens. More precisely, the “City too Busy to Hate” shirked on the needs of its poor, Black community, and that same community was further targeted and victimized by a serial killer. While race was the key factor tying the victims and their advocates together, class was the more prevalent yet underlying element that allowed the case to be neglected for at least one year since the initial murder. A certain amount of wealth and the opportunities that that wealth provided, such as better housing and access to work, afforded middle-class and elite African American children the assurance of safety and protection during the Atlanta Murders. In 1980 Camille Bell said, “There are people who count, and people who don’t count. The people who had children getting killed, they were people who don’t count. And they couldn’t make the other people do nothing about it.”⁶⁰ This conclusion was instrumental in both showcasing the evolving relationships of race, class, and trauma during the Atlanta Child Murders because the reality was that Atlanta’s poor, Black citizens were the undesirables of the city. Their survival hinged on protecting themselves within their communities and coping in a society where fear became the new norm.

“It Was Like There was a Boogeyman Out There, and He was Snatching Black Children”⁶¹

Tayari Jones recounts her childhood during the Atlanta Child Murders from the perspective of three fifth graders in her 2002 novel, *Leaving Atlanta*. Jones creates characters who face the very real problems that Atlanta’s Black children encountered: abuse, navigating single-parent households and working parents, and coping when close friends and neighbors became victims of the Boogeyman. Parents could not answer the questions that their children

⁶⁰ Page, “Fear Clenches Atlanta As Children Disappear,” 3.

⁶¹ Audra D. S. Burch, “Who Killed Atlanta’s Children?,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/us/atlanta-child-murders.html>.

had, nor could they dissuade any fear surrounding the possibility of abduction or death; for these Black children, a nightmare became actualized. Fiction transformed into reality during the Child Murders, and both children and parents simultaneously became victims of a very real serial killer and the hypothetical unknown. The audience grapples with the reality of death and non-existence through the lens of fifth grade Octavia Fuller. Chillingly, in the midst of the killings, Octavia makes the observation, “Mama knew where I was... But knowing don’t mean nothing if you can’t be there. And anyway, by the time a mama can figure out that she don’t know where her child is, it’s all over with anyway.”⁶² Parents seemingly knew, or perhaps feared, this same observation. In a tense interaction between young Octavia and her mother where Octavia arrived home late from playing in the park after school, her mother slapped her, “I didn’t know if you were kidnapped, somewhere raped, laying in a ditch... How many children got to die before you learn to bring your ass home?”⁶³ Finally, as fear clenches the city and the playground slowly empties, Octavia leaves Atlanta and escapes death and the unknown.

Children learned chants to remind them to avoid strangers, and they exclaimed, “You could be the one. You could be the bad one. There’s somebody bad murdering Black children and you could be the one.”⁶⁴ Every unknown man or woman was a suspect as long as parents had no answers for themselves or their children. Parents became disillusioned with Maynard Jackson, emphatically declaring phrases such as, “I can’t stand to see that yellow bastard standing up there acting like he care about black children. It makes me sick to my stomach,” and children could

⁶² Tayari Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 154.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 218-19.

⁶⁴ Susan Brown, “Rash of Child Killings Turns Atlanta into a City of Nightmares,” *S. F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, March 1, 1981, 6.

not trust the police, or “The Man.”⁶⁵ Jones’s novel represents the changing psychology of Atlanta during the Child Murders, but more importantly, it delineates the particular interconnectivity of class and fear. The poor, Black community occupied a socioeconomic status that all but assured that their children would be potential victims of the inconspicuous assailant, and they would be virtually defenseless. The combination of inaction from the police and Mayor Jackson, absence of information from newspapers or authorities, and dead ends in the investigation forced the poor, Black community to form their own truths and defense through processes of inductive reasoning in order to cope.

While critics and columnists felt the truths that the Black community formed were nothing more than “sensationalized fiction,” psychologists assessed that killer was “Houdini,” and he could not be seen because he was invisible, inconspicuous, and had “every reason to be where he is” because he was “a part of the everyday social fabric.”⁶⁶ The stories that the Black community created in order to conceptualize a faceless killer were defense mechanisms intended to fill gaps of knowledge, and regarding those survival attempts as “sensationalized fiction” or simple conspiracy theories served to remove the Black community’s agency and logic in protecting its children. Patricia Turner argued that rumors were a way for the Atlanta’s poor Black citizens spread information amongst themselves in order to exercise authority in response to the malicious forces attacking their community; or rather, rumors were communal attempts to

⁶⁵ Tayari Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 111; Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 99. On the streets, the killer was referred to as “the Man.” It was widely believed that Atlanta’s black police were the most suspicious members of the population in Black communities.

⁶⁶ R. Emmett Tyrrell, “Atlanta and the Myth of Racism,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, January 24, 1982, 3D; George B. Greaves, John S. Currie, and Allen C. Carter, “Atlanta, Psychology, and the Second Siege: Report to APA by the Georgia Psychological Association’s Ad Hoc Resource Committee on Murdered and Missing Atlanta Children,” *American Psychologist* 37, no. 5 (May 1982): 565, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.37.5.559>.

“exert control in the face of uncertainty.”⁶⁷ The rumors instilled group cohesion and solidarity among the poor, Black citizens of Atlanta, a city that they perceived to not care about their plight. From the slow response of the police to the perceived insincerity of the local government, Black Atlantans had no reason to believe that the city cared more about them than it did its economy. As a result, many Blacks were led to three conclusions: the killer was a part of the police, the killings were part of a plot to undo the Civil Rights Movement, or the killings were a part of medical experiments conducted by the Atlanta-based Center for Disease Control. Regardless of the conclusion, poor, Black Atlantans recognized they could trust no one.

Within Atlanta’s poor Black community, the sentiment was “if you must call a policeman— for God’s sake, try to make sure it [is] a white one.”⁶⁸ The history of the police department and the Black community was complex, and the shorter history of Black police officers and the poor Black community was plausibly more complex extremely nuanced. In the 1940’s Atlanta’s civic leaders campaigned for more black officers who would “be capable of distinguishing among classes and types of blacks,” and their efforts paid off in December 1967 when Atlanta’s first Black officers, called the “Atlanta Eight,” joined the police force.⁶⁹ Black citizens assumed the addition of people of color on the police force would reduce the police prejudice and brutality they experienced, but as the first Black officers in Atlanta demonstrated, the diversity of the force did not mean fundamental alteration of the White power structure in

⁶⁷ Patricia Turner, “The Atlanta Child Murders: A Case Study of Folklore in the Black Community,” in *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Life* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1991), 85.

⁶⁸ Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 99.

⁶⁹ James Forman, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 83. Ibid., 87: Mayor William Hartsfield said at their induction, “You are more than just policemen. You are going out as the first representatives of your race in Atlanta. Your success is my success and the success of the City Council, the Chief, your race, and the city at large.”

place at the Atlanta police department. A 1967 government-funded task report on the police indicated that, “personal knowledge of minority groups and slum neighborhoods can lead to information not otherwise available, to earlier anticipation of trouble, and to increased solution of crime.”⁷⁰ The addition of minority police officers benefited the relationship between the community and police; however, the analysis further showed that “they [Black police officers] were harsher than white officers”; furthermore, both White and Black officers agreed that this unfair treatment was because, “Many Negro officers were indignant and ashamed because of the high number of Negro offenders.”⁷¹ Some police officers denied that their use of excessive force had to do with race, instead claiming that, by any means necessary, they wanted to protect Black neighborhoods from major crime and disorder— such as loitering and drunkenness.⁷² Poor, Black citizens resented Black officers, so much so that they preferred White officers. At the hands of Black members of the police force, poor, Black citizens experienced as much— if not more— abuse as at the hands of White officers. For them, the addition of Black officers did more good for the middle- and upper-class Blacks who pushed for Black officers to better distinguish between the working-class and affluent. While the report is from 1967 Pittsburgh and San Diego, its findings remained relevant in 1979 Atlanta, where citizens believed that Black officers were harsh in order to prove that while they were not Black like the poor, Black masses.⁷³ The addition of Black officers on the police force meant another win for the Black mecca but another

⁷⁰ The President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, “Task Force Report: The Police” (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1967), 167, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/147374NCJRS.pdf>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Forman, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, 109.

⁷³ Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 100.

loss for its population of non-talented and non-exceptional Negroes.⁷⁴ For Atlanta's Black community, the serial killer could have been a police officer, especially a Black one, because of officers' contempt for poor Black people along with the neighborhood accessibility that the job provided them. The Black community understood what the police were capable of, and this understanding was a strong enough reason to resent and distrust the officers who were tasked to protect them during the Atlanta Child Murders.

Rather than intra-racial tensions, many Black Atlantans theorized that the killings were part of a plot to "unmake" the Civil Rights Movement and start a race war.⁷⁵ When Atlanta's police department began to seriously investigate the murders, almost all newspapers speculated that the murders were racial, if not racist, in nature—the victims looked alike, came from the same class, and the city was not too far removed from the Civil Rights Era. The community's response was to prepare for the implications in the only way it knew how. Community leaders and city officials formed an *ad hoc* organization to study ways to ease racial tensions and determined that "high black unemployment and inadequate housing, as well as the murders" needed to be addressed.⁷⁶ The Black Vietnam veterans, however, offered to train Atlanta's Black population in using weapons and military techniques in order to "defend their families and property," emphasizing, "If it takes our blood to run in the streets, let it be."⁷⁷ Residents of Techwood, Atlanta's largest housing project, formed a short-lived coalition called the Techwood

⁷⁴ This is in reference to the term "exceptional Negro" and DuBois term, "talented tenth," which was used to describe how the Black race would be saved and uplifted by its exceptional leaders. Furthermore, DuBois formulated the idea of "double consciousness," which stated, in sum, that affluent or middle-class Blacks internalized society's anti-blackness, which created internal conflict and turmoil—they were Black but a special kind of Black, separate from the poor Blacks.

⁷⁵ Paul Mokrzycki Renfro, "'The City Too Busy to Care': The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Southern Past, 1979-81," *Southern Cultures* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 44.

⁷⁶ Page, "Fear Clenches Atlanta As Children Disappear," 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; Renfro, "'The City Too Busy to Care,'" 57.

Bat Patrol. The Bat Patrol enforced their Constitutional right to defend their homes and children because they lost their trust and confidence in the police and, “[t]his was a situation that we needed to correct for ourselves, and we’re going to do it.”⁷⁸ Using handguns, carbines, and bats, the patrol monitored their housing project and were called vigilantes because the police and mayor were “scared of people organizing themselves.”⁷⁹ The Bat Patrol quickly disbanded because one of its members, Eddie Duncan, became a victim of the Atlanta Child Murderer soon after joining, and residents of the housing project felt that it was because the formation of the Patrol was a challenge to the killer. The differences in the solutions that the middle-class and the working-class Black Atlantans worked toward were striking; one group studied and determined that housing and unemployment relief would ameliorate the situation, while the other took action and determined that community-policing would be more beneficial. One way was not more superior to the other— housing and unemployment were issues that needed to be addressed in order to aid the Black community— but it was best put by Camille Bell, “You can’t solve cascade problems in Vine City.”⁸⁰ The poor, Black community was a group that grew disillusioned and faithless in their government. Black civic leaders were a part of the group of affluent African Americans who ignored that there was a murder problem for nearly one year, and interestingly, they felt they had the authority to determine what should be done to protect the same community it had earlier ignored. It greatly resembles the way in which Jackson’s administration seized autonomy from the STOP Committee. The wealthy and poor Black respectively responded to the threat of racism by working through and against a system that

⁷⁸ Modibo Kadalie, Modibo Kadalie Oral History Interview, 2010- 11-12, interview by Matthew Quest, November 12, 2010, pt. 02:26:00, <https://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/digital/collection/voicelabor/id/31>.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pt. 02:28:00.

⁸⁰ Newman, “Committee To Stop Murder Of Children,” 7. Cascade housed Atlanta’s Black elite, while low-income families lived in Vine City.

benefited one class and created an environment that allowed the serial killings to take place for the other. Here, it was not the conspiracy itself that was important; it was the response to the conspiracy that mattered: respectability or retribution.

Black Atlanta's distrust extended past social institutions and hate groups and into the realm of logic and science. Atlanta's Center for Disease Control (CDC) had a tenuous relationship with its Black population, and that relationship was further strained during the Atlanta Child Murders because of a drug called interferon. Interferon was an astoundingly expensive, naturally occurring drug that helped treat cancer, fought viruses, and had the potential to cure the common cold.⁸¹ Cells produce interferon when they are attacked by viruses as a part of the body's immunological defense. The drug appeared to have some anti-tumor properties and the ability to fight against viral diseases, so the American Cancer Society poured money into further research.⁸² Dick Gregory suggested that the child murders could have been the work of the CDC; he claimed, "Researchers needed a substance found in the penises of young black males in order to produce the anti-cancer drug."⁸³ Ultimately, there was no proof after the claim's investigation, but that did not stop the idea from circulating in the Black community. Similar to the anti-Semitic blood libel urban legend where a non-Jewish boy is castrated by Jews because they need his blood for Passover, the Atlanta legend portrays Whites who need Black body parts in order to perfect a "miracle" drug.⁸⁴ The difference, however, is that the White

⁸¹ "Companies Mobilize To Make Interferon," *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, March 6, 1980, 5B.

⁸² "Interferon Worsens Form of Cancer, Study Shows," *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); *Atlanta, Ga.*, July 4, 1982, 7A.

⁸³ Mitchell J. Shields, "The Atlanta Story," *Columbia Journalism Review*; *New York, N. Y.* 20, no. 3 (September 1, 1981): 35.

⁸⁴ Turner, "The Atlanta Child Murders: A Case Study of Folklore in the Black Community," 82.

majority replaces the role of the “despised minority.”⁸⁵ Atlanta’s legend was also tied to its economy. Black Atlantans believed that its city cared more about its wealth and image than it did the welfare of its Black citizens, and businesses poured millions of dollars into interferon research. Suggesting that the city would sacrifice its poor Black boys in order to earn a profit was not far-fetched to people who lived in this context.

Forty years prior to the events of the Atlanta Child Murders, Georgia’s neighboring state of Alabama experienced a case study in which medicine, progress, and the hierarchy of class and race loyalty were put to the test. In *Uplifting the Race*, Kevin Gaines argues, “as it pertains to issues of power, class, and black leadership, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment is a tragic illustration of how a hunger for status combined with economic dependence can result in a suspension of moral agency.”⁸⁶ In 1932, the Tuskegee Institute partnered with the Public Health Service to study the effects of untreated syphilis in Black men. The men, who were poor and working-class, agreed to be treated for their “bad blood” without being told that they were part of an experiment.⁸⁷ Until 1972, the unknowing participants and their infected partners were never given adequate treatment for their disease; luckily, however, an Associated Press story was released that year, causing a public outcry. The federally subsidized experiment had the cooperation of local Black and White physicians; nurses; medical technicians; and the officials of Tuskegee Institute, a historically Black university, including its Black principal, Robert R. Moton.⁸⁸ The Tuskegee medical experiments illustrated the precarious position the Black middle

⁸⁵ Michael P. Carroll, “‘The Castrated Boy’: Another Contribution to the Psychoanalytic Study of Urban Legends,” *Folklore* 98, no. 2 (1987): 216.

⁸⁶ Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race : Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 254.

⁸⁷ “Tuskegee Study - Timeline - CDC - NCHHSTP,” October 3, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>.

⁸⁸ *Uplifting the Race : Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, 253.

class and elite maintained: in order to achieve racial uplift and succeed in a White society, distinguished members of the Black community were forced to impose class distinctions and assume the role of their White counterparts, thereby betraying poor Blacks. Black technicians and nurses comforted their poor, Black patients and assured them that they would treat their “bad blood,” yet those Black technicians and nurses worked alongside the White physicians who ultimately wanted to watch the patients die. They reasoned that the hurt and pain that the poor, Blacks experienced would eventually pay off for the entirety of the race.⁸⁹ The Black medical staff, just as the Maynard Jackson administration, had to choose which arguments were important enough to involve themselves in, and repeatedly, historically the affluent chose whatever benefited themselves the most in each battle of race and class warfare. Conspiracy, myths, and folklore hold a modicum of truth to them; thus, the apprehension that Black Atlantans felt towards both Whites and the Black elite was warranted because both groups have abandoned their morals in pursuit of selfish ideals in the past. Rather than a local government acting in its own best interest, it was middle-class and affluent Blacks acting within a White power medical structure where poor, Black communities would always lose.

Conclusion

On June 8, 1981, Phillip Pope, a white resident of Atlanta, wrote a letter of gratitude to the Honorable Mayor Maynard H. Jackson stating, “Fortunately for all of us, you have consistently refused to resort to race baiting.”⁹⁰ Pope continued the letter with the bashing of the press and white politicians who uttered wild accusations, innuendoes, and ‘half-truths,’ then finally, “Thankfully all of you [Mayor Jackson, Police Chief Napper, and Public Safety

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Phillip Pope, “Letter of Thanks to Maynard Jackson,” June 8, 1981, Maynard Jackson Papers: Box 134-Folder 4, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library Archives Research Center.

Commissioner Brown], unlike some outsiders, have gone to extraordinary pains to play down the racial characterization of the killer(s).” In a series of murders where nearly thirty children and young adults lost their lives and where race and wealth were key determinants in who became the victims of a serial killer, Pope thought it pertinent to praise Mayor Jackson’s unwavering respectability and professionalism first and foremost. The “Atlanta Spirit” dictated that anything good for business was good for Atlanta, and in 1979, the Atlanta Child Murders challenged the city’s industry and convention city status. Maynard Jackson’s attempt to maintain the “Atlanta Spirit” included waiting a year before serious police investigation, playing a role in the disbanding of the STOP Committee and other organizations whose goals included protecting their own community, and making ‘good press’ by showing the accomplishments of Atlanta’s Black middle class while ignoring its working class. The Jackson administration, the integrated police force, and Black elites did little for its working-class Black citizens during the Murders. The Atlanta Child Murders disrupted the White power structure, or the “Atlanta Spirit,” and the Jackson administration, along with its Black elite, only investigated the cases after the ‘bad press’ threatened Atlanta’s economy. The fear that faced the working class was based on family and experience; the fear that faced the affluent was based on status and wealth.

In the case of the Atlanta Child Murders, the poor, Black citizens of Atlanta found themselves victims of structural racism shrouded in the guise of progress. The imagined Boogeyman and conspiracies of the Atlanta Child Murders were significantly less frightening than the reality that the Atlanta local government and affluent Blacks acted in their own best interest to protect Atlanta’s image rather than protect Atlanta’s most vulnerable citizens. Poor Black Atlantans were victims of a serial killer, victims of their city, and victims of their own

race. Rather than viewing the murders as a race-based murder mystery, the cases could— and should— be used as a litmus test or vehicle for understanding the social and political state of Atlanta in the early 1980's. Furthermore, that understanding or case study should be applied to twenty-first century Atlanta to determine whether the power structure that allowed the serial killer to rampage the streets of Atlanta for nearly three years remains ingrained in our society.

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