BUILDING ATLANTA

By Kamille D. Whittaker

A fascinating morsel about Atlanta's insider politics comes midway into the "Mixing Business and Politics" chapter of Herman J. Russell's memoir, "Building Atlanta."

At the time, many of Atlanta's African Methodist Episcopal churches' bishops were close friends of Russell and businessman Jesse Hill Jr. Former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, who wanted to be elected to Georgia's Fifth District Seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1972, knew he needed to go through the bishops after speaking with local political strategist Fred Bennett. "Nobody can get the preachers together but Mr. Hill and Mr. Russell," said Bennett. "Why would they come together?" asked Young. "Well, Herman built all those churches and Jessie financed them."

Later, in 1991, veteran Atlanta business journalist Maria Saporta declared what she termed the "first family" of Atlanta's power structure to be The Coca-Cola Co., flanked by Trust Co. of Georgia, King & Spalding, Emory University, and the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation. "Other players were in the mix such as Georgia Power, Rich's, BellSouth and Delta Air Lines, but none was as powerful as the first family." The point hit home, she says, when Ray Riddle, then-CEO of First Atlanta Bank and chairman of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, told her: "Nothing gets done in this town without first going by North Avenue (Coca-Cola's headquarters)."

Saporta goes on to outline the alchemy of CEO appointments, Board chairmanships and stock sell-offs between the city's corporate families (for example, she points to a time when SunTrust Bank unloaded Coca-Coca stock, as well as the first time a Coca-Cola Co. CEO did not serve on the SunTrust board). The two anecdotes' implications are admittedly limited: The AME's civic and political heft of yore, for instance, wasn't enough to galvanize sufficient support to save its constituent Morris Brown College on its own recognizance today. And the corporate "kingmaker" power that Coca-Cola once held is now decentered by the likes of The Home Depot, UPS, SunTrust, Delta and Southern Company/Georgia Power.

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The two anecdotes *do* provide some insight into the dynamics that may explain how it could be that by the time the last walls of Friendship Baptist Church are razed to make way for the Falcons' new stadium, the narrative of the 130-year-old historic church will be crowded out by "Rise Up" American football anthems featuring celebrity stand-ins and — wait for it — crimson and ebony-cloaked gospel choirs.

Oh, the irony, the paradox, that is Atlanta. Indeed, Atlanta tears things down to build up new shiny things, but not without the requisite head nods and ring kisses. The $19.5 million that it took to get the church administration to barter history for the City's economic ambitions is just the latest iteration in the 40-odd year habit, beginning with Mayor Maynard Jackson in 1974, and seeded nearly 100 years prior with Booker T. Washington's infamous "Atlanta Compromise" speech and fanned by the flames of the Atlanta Race Riots of 1906. While overtime, it ushered in a new class of black middle class managers and contractors and appeared to decenter and disperse pods of poverty, the strategy still seems to fall short of achieving the balance that having the triple threat of politics, economics and influence would afford.

Atlanta, as a microcosm for the trajectory of the nation's political and race economy, sits at the nexus of the United States' political, social and cultural crossroads — a beacon, of sorts, for the possible power dynamics for a late 20th century/early 21st century "progressive" city. Robert Bland, lecturer at the Institute for Responsible Citizens, explains that jobs and factories shifted away from the Midwest and a growing conservative sentiment eschewed municipal taxes, unions, and the urban poor, the once maligned South was now the archetype for how the lagging, post-industrial United States economy could be resuscitated. With minimal taxes, inexpensive suburbs, non-unionized labor, and black leaders that partnered with the city's headquartered corporations, the South was now at the forefront of national progress. Plus, the city had a reputation for placing the interests of big business over the demands of troublesome "Old South" segregationists, which allowed Atlanta to lure multinational corporations and retain a willing labor class to fuel the city's burgeoning sectors. Although the capital produced by these corporations was funneled away from the city proper and into the suburbs and Atlanta's surrounding counties, the relationship between the big business presence and the growing black middle class was almost enough to blunt the criticism that not enough was being done for those on the lowest rung of the power hierarchy.

Dr. Jelani Cobb, featured historian on the upcoming documentary "The Atlanta Way," says W.E.B. Du Bois, who spent most of his years as an academic at then Atlanta University, predicted this precise dynamic more than a century ago.

"W.E.B. Du Bois said that Atlanta was north of the south and south of the north and that it was almost an exceptional city from the outset. I don't think Atlanta ever quite fit into that mold of the sleepy southern town. And prophetically Du Bois — in the 'Souls of Black Folk' essay Wings of Atalanta — talks about the development of the city in such a way that they run the risk of having commerce crush the charm away from the city."

Du Bois posits that the highest end of politics, the ultimate aim of education and highest goal of civic life will be the pursuit of money.

"In that essay, he says this is the dominant ethic of the white founders and fathers of the city, and there are black folk who feel the same way and they'll run the city, so nobody really cares," continues Cobb. "But at some point they'll have a great deal of influence in how the city is run and what they think will be very important. And so we look now, 105 years after that essay was first published, we see exactly how prescient Du Bois was that these are the exact themes we are looking at now."

The 2009 City of Atlanta mayoral election was supposed to be a realigning one, and it was indeed in many ways. It was supposed to be the punctuation on a four black mayor run that thrusted the city into a unique shared power arrangement between the political clout of African Americans and the financial heft of the white voting and funding bloc. It was supposed to expose the economic shallowness of the black political bloc — shoring up the prevailing thought that Atlanta as we know it would flop without the unparalleled financial buy-in from its neighbors due north.

Several key factors were at play: Atlanta had undergone a major demographic shift. While a quarter of a million African Americans migrated to the city from 2005-2010, predominantly black strongholds were and continue to be in flux. Even the Old Fourth Ward is less than 75 percent African American now, down from 94 percent African American in 1990. The neighborhood has seen housing prices and property taxes sky-rocket while low-rent apartments are demolished and replaced with new developments and new residents. Bruce Dixon, managing editor of *The Black Agenda Report* describes it as the "failure of the Black leadership class to deliver significant benefits to the poor and working class African Americans who have assisted and supported them in governing Atlanta." Atlanta's African-American population, on a whole, shifted from 68 percent within city limits to 54 percent.

At a critical time, Mary Norwood, a white, Buckhead-based and backed Atlanta City Council member had 30.6 percent "stated" support from black constituents. If she had won, and become the first white mayor in 40 years in a predominantly black city, The Mecca, at that, it would have substantiated the claim that Buckhead was the regional kingmaker. Buckhead, which has long been threatening to "take its ball and go home," has been touting its indispensability to the city's viability as a whole. Norwood's remarkable loss to Mayor Kasim Reed showed that the financial clout of Buckhead alone was not enough to win an election, a question long begging a resolution. And indeed, while a secession of Buckhead or even North Fulton County would likely spark Atlanta and Detroit comparisons (while only 10 percent of Atlanta's population, Buckhead's residents account for 45 percent of the annual ad valorem tax, for example), pundits still underestimated the effect of black leadership, and the symbolism of it, on the political behavior of a predominantly black and politicized electorate in a southern matrix. For now, Reed and his heir apparents are on solid ground.

And to further complicate matters for the mostly white financial establishment, Lolita Browning Jackson, president of the prestigious and influential Buckhead Business Association, is black. But blackness and black faces fronting key organizations and municipalities has its limits, to say nothing of the complexities it presents across political ideological lines. It certainly couldn't keep, the Atlanta Braves home and sated.

The Atlanta Braves stadium moving to Cobb County can, on the surface, be conceded as a loss. The City of Atlanta stands to not only lose roughly $60.8 million in annual tax revenue but also what Du Bois termed in his seminal "Black Reconstruction" a "public and psychological wage." However, more attention on Cobb County could also mean additional scrutiny to the County's curiously non-diverse political and judicial landscape, despite its diverse voter rolls. Also front-burnered: The County's quiet population and resource distribution changes and what that means for future investment in MARTA, a quasi-governmental entity that is subsidized almost predominantly by African Americans in DeKalb and Fulton counties; and African-American business contracting opportunities.

While African-American businesses throw their weight around in the northern city limits, and alter perceptions, the hard numbers and facts are still at play, says Leo Smith, a political minority engagement director and CEO of Engaged Futures Inc., who reveals that the upward mobility index for African Americans in metro Atlanta has been decreasing for the past eight years steadily.

"We have a situation not unlike what we had in the '40s. We had the opportunities to build sustainable communities and we did so, but here we are today with the same opportunity and somehow we lack the capacity to do what we did then to establish neighborhoods and create a great middle class lifestyle and get people involved in entrepreneurship. Somehow, all because of a broken economy. There's also an issue of sort of a lowering of a bar of expectations and with that, there is a lack of infrastructure building interest in predominately African-American communities. The interest in establishing companies that might have some tax incentives is

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trumped by political rhetoric and perhaps even some confusion by the rules of economics. They'll say, 'we don't want to give tax breaks to middle class people who are trying to open a business.'"

Smith speaks of the stated economic intention to expand the black middle class, but the actual policies reveal an intraracial power tug of war along ideological lines exemplified by the recent black vendor strike.

"How do we start businesses in black communities when we overregulate and pillage them before they even start making money? And the rhetoric that we hear in response is, 'stop complaining because you have black leadership and we don't want any one criticizing black leaders.'"

Smith offers up that despite a major lobby against it, including from the formidable Congressman John Lewis, 72 percent of African Americans ended up voting for the charter school amendment in Georgia which would expand the ability of communities and organizations to create educational institutions that service the specific needs of the respective communities. The widespread support locally can be read as a referendum on "civil rights politics" and the leaders of that guard as well as a pushback to the Atlanta Public School scandal that blew the cover off the stew of corruption and mismanagement in the city's predominantly black secondary public schools over decades, even as African Americans have a unique relationship to investment in free public education — it being the most consequential right secured post-Emancipation and the proven key to generational economic solvency.

"I don't believe Congressman Lewis understood the implications when he said the amendment was going to re-segregate the schools and he's saying that coming from a district that's 98 percent black. He is talking out of historic rhetoric rather than talking out of reality, fighting that fight that was fought 60 years ago and trying to seek relevance. Today's black person wants great education for their children. They fought hard to block that … they were so out of touch, the black community voted for it anyway."

The State School Superintendent race is an example of a local power struggle, Smith continues. "Alisha Thomas Morgan is a Democrat, Spelman grad the youngest state representative in Georgia. She was a dynamic, hard leading woman who fought for black children and school choice and the Democratic Black Caucus of Georgia actually banned her and censored her by letter. They put up somebody who was sponsored by the National Education Association Union to go against her so that she wouldn't win State Superintendent. So, you have a unionized person fighting for and with the rich, pretending to care about black people beating a person who truly is down for black people. *That* is a reversal of power."

However elusive, Black Power cannot be evoked in modern contexts without venerating the stances of one Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) who, among many things, analyzed the relationship between integration and power and criticized the former because it did little to address the powerlessness and dependence of the black community. Within the context of the civil rights movement, its establishment as a goal and the pace of its progress were entirely determined by the white allies of the movement, and thus, the political and social rights of blacks "have always been and always will be negotiable and expendable the moment they conflict with the interests of our 'allies.'" In place, Ture advocated the goal of Black Power, which can be defined as the congealing of political and economic power within black communities in a way that liberates and insulates it from dependence on ancillary support. One of the first implementations of the concept was apparent in the Atlanta Project, a branch of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee founded in early 1966, which helped organize poor and working-class African Americans in the predominantly black, segregated, and impoverished Vine City neighborhood of Atlanta. As the organization's first foray into urban organizing, its members hoped that the Atlanta Project would not only serve as a model for political and economic organizing in Atlanta but also in urban areas throughout the country. Much of their organizing activities revolved around campaign organizing for Julian Bond and other political candidates as well as challenging basic human rights issues such as poor housing conditions, the lack of a living wage, police brutality, and problematic U.S. foreign policy.

It all culminates in our current considerations of our socio-political moment, where, for example, the uprisings in Ferguson, Mo., after the killing of a black teenager by a white police officer, show how the economic, political, educational and judicial heft of any given black community are inextricably intertwined in any given city. Here, in Atlanta, it isn't until the veneer of the city, as we imagine it to be, is removed, that we see the continuing power struggles on the political, legislative, economic and educational fronts. A city cannot have top-notch political representation and a lackluster education system; demonstrate economic robustness, but languishing voter registration and turn-out among the black population and thus, only token representation on juries which churn out skewed and at times unjust judiciary outcomes. Until the paradoxes are reconciled, in these times, Black Power can exist in name and aspiration, only. AT