

## The New South's Capital Likes to Contradict Itself

By William Jelani Cobb  
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ATLANTA

This past January, Sen. [Barack Obama](#) delivered a speech on Martin Luther King Day at Ebenezer Baptist Church here. The symbolism was obvious. Appearing in King's home church just a few weeks after winning the Iowa caucuses, Obama was a visible embodiment of the boldest aspirations of the civil rights movement. When he returned to the Atlanta metro area last week to speak and raise money for his campaign, the moment was less symbolic but possibly even more significant: The first African American with a reasonable chance of becoming president is fighting for the "New South." And he could win it.

It's no coincidence that Obama has visited Atlanta at least three times in the past year. The capital of the New South, Atlanta is a small town trapped inside a big city, a place firmly committed to putting the past behind it and a place where history shows through like paint under primer. To understand how -- and whether -- the Illinois senator's "Southern strategy" might have a chance, take a look at this Bible Belt city where the visibility and political clout of gays rivals that of New York or San Francisco. This is the place where King's vision has been most fully realized. In these early days of the 21st century, Atlanta has become a microcosm of black America.

And we have the contradictions to prove it.

You enter the city via [Hartsfield-Jackson](#), the busiest airport in the country. It's named after two mayors -- one white, one black -- tethered together by a hyphen, a history and a commitment to progress. In fact, if there's any single obsession that binds the city to its past, it's this idea of "progress."

More than a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois lamented that the passion for progress was ruining Atlanta, replacing charm with ambition and faith with lucre. Atlanta's symbol is the phoenix, and almost since the city's 1847 founding, change has been a constant. (It had three names in the first 20 years of its existence.) In its most recent incarnation, the city has been reborn as "ATL," a locale that is to blacks of this era what Harlem was in the 1920s: the destination for a critical mass of highly educated and talented blacks in search of a better life.

Though I was born and raised in New York, my family history in Georgia dates back to the days of slavery. Frustrated by the lack of educational and employment opportunity for blacks in the state, my father left for Harlem at 17, just before World War II. Six years ago, I moved to Atlanta to take a job as a history professor at Spelman College, a highly regarded historically black college for women.

That's progress: A generation later, Georgia lured me for the precise reasons my father left it.

ATL and Atlanta are distinct places, two cities born under different signs, even if they share the same longitude and latitude. The former is both an international city and a mecca for black migrants. It's a place that came into being just after Atlanta hosted the 1996 Summer Olympics, a place where few residents are natives.

In ATL, a thicket of race, success, vanity, poverty and glamour is packaged with great municipal swagger. If BET could design a city, it would look a lot like this one. Both the cable TV network and this city have prospered thanks to black music -- and by marketing a vision of black success and conspicuous consumption. In 2005, Mayor [Shirley Franklin](#), a Philadelphia-raised transplant, undertook a branding campaign that actually commissioned music producer and longtime resident Dallas Austin to create an R&B song called "ATL."

A friend of mine who moved here, opened a successful business, bought a huge house and married a beautiful woman said that he came to the city because he "knew that as a black man, there was nothing that you couldn't achieve in Atlanta." You can see why he believes that. In 2007, Georgia's capital had the second-largest black middle class in the country, teeming with college graduates.

The city has also become a sort of epicenter for the "prosperity gospel" movement, which gives divine benediction to the notion of luxuriant well-being. Eddie Long, pastor of the New Birth Missionary Baptist megachurch, who reportedly earned \$3 million in three years from his nonprofit charity, agreed, under threat of subpoena, to provide Senate investigators with details of his financial records. Creflo Dollar, the pastor of World Changers, another megachurch, has refused to do the same; his famously lavish lifestyle includes several Rolls Royces and a \$2.5 million apartment in Manhattan, in addition to a sizable home in an Atlanta suburb. Taken in isolation, this is American excess as usual, but in ATL, you can't help noticing the distance between these theological perspectives and that of King, who -- almost literally -- opened the doors for them.

This place, ATL, is so distinct from the Southern city that birthed it that you can now see bumper stickers demanding that residents "Put the 'anta' back in Atlanta." Austin's "ATL" inspired an unexpected backlash from residents who felt that an R&B song was not "inclusive" enough. Given the importance of music industry figures such as Austin, [Jermaine Dupri](#), [OutKast](#), [India.Arie](#) and Usher in crafting Atlanta's image, this was roughly akin to residents protesting a country song being used to promote Nashville. The dispute was resolved when Austin returned to the studio to craft an alternate, "bluesy" version of the song -- echoes of something that's long been known here as "the Atlanta way." And of progress.

Atlanta's roots run much deeper than ATL. Drive through the city today, and you encounter a maddening patchwork of street names that seem to change every two miles. Heading west, for instance, you can go from Dekalb Avenue to Decatur Street to Marietta Street to Perry Road without ever hitting your turn signal. The name changes are a holdover from the segregation era, a racial grid that indicated who was eligible to live where.

A century ago, that street map was seen as a novel approach to minimizing the kind of accidental integration on sidewalks and streets that could spark racial calamity. In September 1906, Atlanta exploded in a race riot that raged for days and left dozens of black residents dead. Afterward, the city ushered in the "Atlanta way," a kind of racial detente orchestrated by black and white elites that allowed commerce to thrive. Atlanta understood better and earlier than its Southern peers that macabre images of dead blacks strewn around downtown were, quite simply, bad for business.

During the civil rights era, Atlanta dubbed itself the "city too busy to hate" -- a slogan that [James Baldwin](#) later amended to the city too busy making money to hate. In 1961, Atlanta's public schools desegregated in a process that was quiet compared with the tense governor-in-the-doorway drama that characterized other Southern cities.

The 1973 election of Maynard Jackson as the city's first black mayor was the cornerstone upon which today's "Black Mecca" was built. Jackson transformed the way the city did business, increasing the percentage of contracts for minority-owned businesses from 1 percent to 38 percent during his first term, creating a group known as "Maynard's Millionaires." The five historically black colleges in the city have become an unofficial feeder system expanding the ranks of a black middle class whose lineage stretches back to pre-riot days.

No city can live up to its own marketing brochures, but the gap between image and reality is particularly unsettling in one whose reputation is built on the dream of a martyred visionary.

The large number of black Atlanta homeowners contrasts with the highest percentage of children living below the poverty line in any major American city. According to the most recent U.S. Census data, 48 percent of Atlanta's children and about 24.4 percent of the total population live below the poverty line. The disproportionate number of blacks with master's degrees coexist with one of the country's least efficient school systems.

In 2005, the majority-black city council passed a resolution banning panhandling in the downtown tourist districts -- an area that includes the King Center, a memorial to the civil rights leader's legacy. Thus the doctrine of progress has made it possible for a homeless person to be arrested for begging in front of the [Gandhi](#) statue on Auburn Avenue.

A tide of gentrification has dotted the skyline with condos and commercial developments; in more than one instance, low-income housing has been razed to make way for more profitable undertakings.

Perhaps the most tangled irony of ATL's outward image of black success is that it may be the precise reason for its own demise. The city's higher profile has attracted increasing numbers of white residents. The African American population has slipped from 67 percent in 1990 to 54 percent in 2007. For the first time since the 1920s, the black population is declining, and the white percentage is on the rise. Some neighborhoods in the downtown and eastern portions of the city have virtually priced out their black residents. Progress turns out to be a two-way street.

And that is the truth at the heart of the ATL metaphor. The years since King's death have yielded a strange harvest of success and failure in black America, and our current standing is as complicated as the Atlanta roadmap. And made even more complicated, now, by Obama's run.

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