

Rethinking African American Protest:  
Freaknik and the Civil Rights Legacy of Atlanta

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama  
December 8, 2012

Keywords: Atlanta, Georgia, Civil Rights, Hip-Hop, Protest, Social

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## Abstract

During the late 1980s and early 90s, Atlanta played host to the spring break festival Freaknik. A gathering of Historically Black College and University students and African American youth, Freaknik came to challenge the racial dynamics of a city that billed itself as “too busy to hate.” As black revelers cruised the streets, the congregation of up to 250,000 youth created major logistical problems for the city and forced the residents of the predominantly white neighborhoods of Piedmont Park and Midtown to examine the racial dynamics of Atlanta. These contested neighborhoods became hotbeds of protest, with many white residents viewing the actions of the fete participants as damaging to the neighborhoods. While many within Atlanta’s white community opposed the party, leaders of the black community condemned the actions of African American Mayor Bill Campbell and the white populace for restricting Freaknik, suggesting the actions of Freaknik opponents as racist and unnecessary. Utilizing Atlanta’s Civil Rights legacy, Freaknik participants not only confronted contested spaces of community within Atlanta, but also disputed the ownership of the Civil Rights movement. As the event grew and began to cast a pall over the economic well-being of Atlanta, chiefly its large convention industry, Mayor Campbell and members of the Atlanta City Council came to oppose the event. By challenging the regime politics and economic elites of

Atlanta, Freaknik supporters, organizers, and participants came to be defeated by city leaders in a place that was largely viewed as a Black Mecca.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank first and foremost my parents Bob and Pam for their constant support in all of my endeavors, academic and otherwise, along with my sister Barbara for her ability to keep me grounded and for her unconditional love. Without the continual support of Auburn's history department, this thesis would never come to fruition. I would like to personally thank Dr. Jennifer Brooks, Dr. Ruth Crocker, and Dr. Mark Sheftall for always having an open door in the hallway to bounce ideas off of and guide me through my research. Dr. Aaron Shapiro deserves huge thanks for his ability to steer me through the tangled web of digital sources, permissions, and graduate student life, while keeping a smile on both his and my face. Dr. Charles Israel introducing me to the rich field of southern history laid the groundwork for this project and helped me illuminate connections I would never have stumbled across on my own. Without the help of the archivists at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Morehouse College, Spelman College, the Atlanta History Center, and Dana Chandler at Tuskegee University I would never have been able to complete this work. On a personal level I owe so much to Grace Moss for being a vigilant critic and my go-to editor whenever I found myself in a pinch. The social support of Libbie McElhaney, Tom Ritchie, Zach Wakefield, the crew at the Payne Street house, the Independent,

Gnu's Room, the Plaza, the Music Box, Blake Carlson, Katie Arford, and countless others allowed me to make it through the rigors of graduate school. Finally I would like to thank Dr. David Carter for his persistent optimism and for taking a chance by allowing a graduate student to pursue his real historical interests.

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## Introduction

During the early 1980s, the city of Atlanta played unwitting host to a festival of African American college students dubbed Freaknik. Started as an intimate gathering by the DC Metro Club, a group of students from the Washington D.C. area, the event was small and attracted little attention from the city's media or government.<sup>1</sup> However, by the early 1990s, Freaknik boasted a crowd numbering in the hundreds of thousands and came to highlight the racial divide prevalent in Atlanta.

This thesis examines Freaknik between the years of 1992 and 2000. Analysis will focus on factors that changed the event's dynamic in two periods, first, from 1993-1995 and then from 1996-2000. By highlighting the key issues prevalent in two distinct eras of the party, this study invites scholars' attention to a cultural event with deep historical roots. Freaknik can be seen as in the same tradition of acknowledged forms of racial discourse such as slave rituals of resistance and the civil rights movement.

Freaknik merits scholarly scrutiny in part because it has been dismissed as an out of control party rather than a legitimate forum for social protest. The influx of black youth into predominately white areas combined with traffic congestion on Atlanta's neighborhood streets and highways led to public outcries from citizens

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<sup>1</sup> Krista A. Thompson, "Performing Visibility: Freaknik and the Spatial Politics of Sexuality, Race, and Class in Atlanta," *The Drama Review*, Vol.51, No.4 (Winter 2007):27.



across the metropolis. Many Atlantans and the city government increasingly opposed the event over time, and in 1995 city leaders attempted to stop the celebration altogether. Students, activists, and sympathetic party-goers invoked the legacy of Atlanta's central role in the civil rights movement as a justification for the fete. As Freaknik '95 approached, the festival became a rallying point for African Americans across Atlanta and the greater United States and elicited explicit comparisons to the civil rights movement. In the face of growing opposition, partiers came to view themselves as participants in a protest aimed at shaming the supposedly racially progressive city. Freaknik's participants are best understood as part of a larger history of black carnival and protest rituals through their invocation of the city's storied civil rights legacy and by viewing their actions as a challenge to the white population of Atlanta. Separating themselves from the protest efforts of the 1990s, Freaknik participants were largely unorganized and fought not against specific wrong doings, but rather for the right to congregate in the city. Taking inspiration from the civil rights movement, Freaknik needs to be seen as a protest against the racial inequalities faced by African American youth.

While Freaknik began in early 1980s, it was not until the early 1990s that the festival became a pressing issue for Atlanta. Between the 1993-1995 period, the event largely functioned as a free for all that shut down major streets, interrupted business ventures, and brought large groups of African Americans into predominately white neighborhoods. It was during this period that city leaders came to oppose the event and supporters became vocal in their condemnation of Mayor Campbell's actions. As the event pressed on, Mayor Campbell and members

of the Atlanta city council began to harshly enforce laws, block streets, and create an unwelcoming environment. From 1996-2000 Freaknik began its slow decline until so few visitors arrived that it fell out of conversation in the city.

In order to understand Freaknik, it is critical to explore how the event functioned and to recognize city leader's halfhearted attempts to accommodate it. Illuminating student civil disobedience tactics and the party's resulting impact on the city, the thesis's first chapter examines the cruising and traffic, the free flowing nature of the party, black youth's presence in white areas, and the sexual culture attached to the party as a means of highlighting how Freaknik confronted those who sought to end the celebration. The second chapter illustrates how the party came to challenge the regime politics of Atlanta and eventually declined due to indiscriminate police restrictions and the unwillingness of the city council to work with promoters and organizers.

Municipal action and inaction, coupled with growing hostility among the Atlanta business community, became especially significant following Freaknik '95. Clarence N. Stone in his work, *Regime Politics* examines the tenuous relationship between the business elite of Atlanta and the local politics. Arguing that what makes "Atlanta effective is not the formal machinery of government, but rather the informal partnership between city hall and the downtown business elite," Stone illustrates how Atlanta is unique in comparison with other American cities because of the strong and direct relationship between business and government. Defining this direct connection between business and government as the critical component of regime politics, Stone argues that without the consent of Atlanta's business elite

nothing in the municipal center can be accomplished. Assuming that Atlanta's urban regime, which consists of the confluence of business and government, operated in a biracial relationship, Stone overlooks many economic discrepancies present in Atlanta. Yet his analysis of the relationship between business and city hall proves highly fruitful when examining the actions of Mayor Campbell.<sup>2</sup> As the event developed, Campbell reluctantly subjected himself to a test of wills as he tried to reconcile the interests of business, citizens, and Freaknik partiers.

In a sustained analysis of Freaknik, several categories of players are useful. While Mayor Bill Campbell became the head decision maker concerning the event, city council member Carolyn Long Banks, police chief Beverly Harvard, and presidents of several economic powerhouses including Dave Kenny and Marsha Brinkley of Midtown Alliance all contributed to the decision-making process. While these characters represent the city and the economic players of Atlanta, their views on Freaknik often changed from year to year.

Along with political leaders, several civil rights activists played a role in shaping the course of the event. Georgia ACLU president Teresa Nelson, Atlanta civil rights legend Hosea Williams, NAACP president Dr. Robert Threath, and SCLC president Dr. Joseph Lowery all argued in favor of the event. Aside from civil rights activists and leaders of civil rights groups, local Historically Black College and Universities presidents such as James Costen and Dr. Louis Sullivan were often placed between fighting for the rights of their students and keeping their students safe.

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<sup>2</sup> Stone, *Regime Politics*, 3, 11.

When he ran for election in 1993, however, the event had not yet drawn much attention in city government. Instead of demanding answers on Freaknik planning, the *Spelman Spotlight* ran a brief article exploring Bill Campbell's history, his service to Atlanta, and his impact on the black community during his mayoral campaign. Entering Atlanta politics in 1981, Campbell served on the Atlanta City Council for 12 years. During this time Campbell focused on transparency within the government by proposing legislation that would require elected officials to disclose their business relations, along with the business relations of their family members, to prevent gaining revenue from city contracts. If elected, Campbell promised he would build an open dialogue with the youth of Atlanta by setting up monthly meetings with the Student Government Associations at Atlanta University Center.

Along with his strong political history within Atlanta, his experience within the traditional civil rights movement came to define many aspects of Campbell as mayoral candidate. In a city with such a rich history of strong black leadership, Campbell's role in integrating the schools of Raleigh, North Carolina at the age of 7 placed him within a "new generation of leadership that represents the children of the Civil Rights Movement" coming into political leadership both in the South and on a national level.<sup>3</sup> Under the eye of Mayor Campbell, Freaknik grew to pose significant racial and practical challenges for the city of Atlanta as issues of traffic shutting down major parts of the city and perceptions of African American youth (and not civil rights activism) dominated the conversation surrounding the event.

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<sup>3</sup> Dominique ReKaye Jones, "Campbell Enters Mayoral Race," *Spelman Spotlight*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, May 22, 1993.

Unruly and disruptive visitors to Atlanta paraded through the streets in search of a party, causing headaches for many local residents and the city government. By responding to complaints connected to these disturbances and not associating the event with acknowledged civil rights activities, Campbell missed the chance to associate Freaknik with a long tradition of celebrations acting as protest.

Kevin M. Kruse in his work, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* examines the traditionally understood geographic movement of white flight and argues that it represented more than a physical movement, but rather a reconfiguration of ideology. According to Kruse, “because of their confrontation with the civil rights movement,” Atlanta’s white population was “forced to abandon their traditional, populist, and often starkly racist demagoguery and instead craft a new conservatism predicated on a language of rights, freedoms, and individualism.”<sup>4</sup> This reconfiguration of conservative ideology provides a solid framework for an analysis of the largely, but not exclusively white opposition to Freaknik. Consistently claiming that race was not an issue, economic leaders, neighborhood groups, and average citizens affected by the party sought to fight against the ritualized protest event. This confrontation between the white population and the visiting African American youth has its roots in antebellum period as revelers often confronted those in positions of power.

Historian Stephen Nissenbaum in his work, *The Battle for Christmas*, examines captive and free African Americans in the American South and their inversion rituals surrounding the Christmas season. Fredrick Douglass explains why

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

he believed these rituals of rowdiness and debauchery were allowed by white slave owners when he claimed, “I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. . . these holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

A similar spirit pervaded Freaknik from its earliest days. As a period of celebrations, spring break has represented an opportunity for college students across the color line to escape the responsibilities of school and celebrate their youth in the company of friends. By examining slave rituals such as that of John Canoe and situating Freaknik participants within a similar pattern of shaming and inversion, it becomes clear that this event represented a major dispute over spatial politics and the political legacy of Atlanta.

In order to establish the context for such a comparison, it may be useful to first explore one of the festivals that predated Freaknik. In the coastal region of North Carolina, the performance of the John Canoe ritual separated itself from other inversion rituals steeped in irony and farce, and replaced them with “ritual encounters that bordered on direct confrontation.”<sup>6</sup> Nissenbaum explains this ritual as a band of black men, “generally young—who dressed themselves in ornate and often bizarre costumes . . . accompanied by music, the band marched along the roads from plantation to plantation, town to town, accosting whites along the way and sometimes even entering their houses. In the process the men performed elaborate

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle For Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 266.

<sup>6</sup> Nissenbaum, *The Battle For Christmas*, 285.

and (to white observers) grotesque dances.”<sup>7</sup> While accosting whites for either rum or money, participants in this ritual would sing songs aimed at ridiculing their masters.<sup>8</sup> When analyzing these songs, Nissenbaum claims that the “John Canoers knew that they were not in a position to threaten their white patrons with physical harm. Ridicule was as far as they could go. In any event, it is easy to see how songs of ridicule would have been not merely understood but even brilliantly effective in white Southern society.”<sup>9</sup>

Viewing Freaknik within a larger tradition of African American rituals of rebellion allows for the placement of seemingly insignificant actions such as drinking, fraternizing, and sexual relations to be viewed as direct challenges to the dominant white culture (represented by the threat Freaknik posed to Atlanta’s convention industry). Although during the period of examination Atlanta was predominately black, the actions of the partiers are an attempt to mock the city that was supposedly “too busy to hate.”

Even within the African American community, however, some objected to the party as an illegitimate and counter-productive expression of their values. In May of 1992, Dr. Gloria Wade-Gayles, a professor of English at Spelman College, penned an emotional letter to the students at the AUC asking them to consider the social implications of Freaknik. Recalling a history of African Americans being called “freaks of nature,’ a subhuman species for whom slavery was a gift,” Wade-Gayles

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Nissenbaum, *The Battle For Christmas*, 291.

asked students not to partake in Freaknik because “there is never a time when a people’s name for themselves should be taken lightly.” Asking students to consider Freaknik as an inherently “social activity, within a political context,” her letter sought to warn students against providing ammunition to those who sought to use the perceptions of students visiting Freaknik against the black community. Asking the AUC students to control what others call them by controlling what they call themselves, the English professor equated the term Freaknik with that of “nigger” and “coon.” While Wade- Gayles correctly asserts the fears that many within the AUC and black community felt, her focus on the etymology of the term Freaknik overlooks the rich history of ritualized party protest.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the professor might have done more to acknowledge Atlanta’s particular significance as a gathering place for people in her community.

A critical issue in the story of Freaknik is the perception that Atlanta is a black Mecca or home place for African Americans throughout the country. Bell Hooks argues that that “throughout our history, African-Americans have recognized the subversive value of home place, of having access to private space where we do not directly encounter white racist aggression,” and in a predominately black city with such a significant civil rights history, Atlanta can certainly be described as a home place to many African Americans. It is in this home place that black political thought is born and nurtured. Framing the home place as directly linked to sites of resistance, the actions taken by Freaknik supporters and visitors which link the

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<sup>10</sup> Gloria Wade Gayles, “An Open Letter to Students in the Atlanta University Center,” *Spelman Spotlight*, Vol. XXXV, No. 8, May 6, 1992.



youthful party to Atlanta's Civil Rights history take on much deeper meaning as an attempt to highlight the subversive aura Atlanta enjoyed within the black community.<sup>11</sup> Despite the rebellious impression Atlanta had instilled in many African Americans, their role within the city was often that of second class citizens.

Ronald H. Bayor in his book, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* explores the significance of race in Atlanta. In the book, Bayor examines the role race played in shaping public policy and urban planning during the mid-twentieth-century. Bayor claims that race in Atlanta impacted "all aspects of city life—politics, housing, street and highway patterns, neighborhood formation, annexation, employment, basic city services, park and recreational space, health care, mass transit development, and schooling." By the end of the twentieth-century, Atlanta was "the product of a past that emphasized racial issues."<sup>12</sup> This past influenced the conversation of the modern era as both black and white residents struggled to reconcile their past which had so strongly stressed racial difference.

The inability of the city and its residents to have an open discussion on Freaknik without falling into racial diatribes illuminates this gap in Atlanta. African Americans and whites lived in two separate worlds, and to publicly discuss Freaknik would highlight this fact. Katura Mitchell said she cried on the Sunday night of Freaknik '93, not because a young student screamed "'Move out the way, white bitch'" at her, as she drove the wrong way down the street near Piedmont Park, but because when she ran for the Georgia state senate 16 years prior she claimed "I was

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<sup>11</sup> Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 225.

called ‘nigger lover.’”<sup>13</sup> Cynthia Tucker, a staff member of *Atlanta Journal Constitution* provided a statement that explains many of the problems associated with organizing and dealing with Freaknik challenged the black Atlantans who viewed criticisms about the partiers “as prima facie evidence of racism” and urged residents to discuss the event in rational terms.<sup>14</sup> Freaknik came to highlight the existing racial tension in Atlanta as whites predominately came to oppose it and blacks came to support it.<sup>15</sup> According to Tucker, Freaknik came to “separate us across an invisible racial fault line . . . [acting] as a lightning rod for the racial prejudices and suspicions and misunderstandings that this society has not yet put away.”<sup>16</sup>

By forcing people to confront these sentiments, Freaknik influenced the regime politics of Atlanta in dramatic ways. According to scholar Clarence Stone, Atlanta’s governing body is so intertwined with the economic elite that nothing can get done in the city without the approval of big business. As the party began to hurt the economic opportunities of the city, the city council, and the police of Atlanta, under the influence of the business class, began to crack down on Freaknik until students no longer felt comfortable in the city.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Katura Mitchell, “Viewpoints Freaknik ‘93 No Need for Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 29, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Cynthia Tucker, “Freaknik illustrates Atlanta’s own racial fault line,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 27, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> While there certainly were exceptions to this statement, on the whole perceptions on Freaknik came to be drawn down racial lines.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 3, 11.

Looking at this carnival-like festival within the larger 1992–2000 allows one to first grasp the racial undertones connected to the city of Atlanta, the influence of its Civil Rights legacy, and its socioeconomic disparities, and also highlights the actions taken by the city to shut down the event through the lens of regime politics.

## Chapter 1

### Partying as a Political Act

Starting in the early 90s, Freaknik came to pose a significant influence on the city leaders of Atlanta and became a hotly discussed topic. During this period issues of traffic, spatial politics, and vocalized comparisons to the civil rights movement dominated the conversation surrounding the event. Starting with an analysis of how traffic functioned and was used as a protest tactic, this work will then highlight how large groups of black youth undermined the perceived dominance of white ownership in neighborhoods like Midtown and Piedmont Park. After establishing the role of traffic in challenging the spatial politics of Atlanta, the dialogue of Freaknik then becomes transformed by supporters of the event who take on direct comparisons to the traditional civil rights movement.

During the '93 and '94 period, the traffic caused by Freaknik became the catalyst for debate as the infrastructure of Atlanta became riddled with traffic jams throughout Midtown and the surrounding areas. Chris Smith, an Atlanta police officer, provides a glimpse into efforts utilized by students to enjoy Freaknik despite the traffic: "They're dancing in the streets. They're riding in the streets. And when the traffic backs up, which it always does, then they get out of their cars and, well,

they are dancing in the streets again.”<sup>18</sup> Residents of Piedmont Park were forced to either stay in their homes or venture into the crowded streets to sit in traffic for hours. The sheer amount of people allowed students to hold guerilla parties in parking lots, on street corners, in public parks, and on roadsides. While Atlanta-based public relations firms ELQ communications and Black Entertainment Television (BET) sponsored athletic contests, rap concerts, and other events for visitors, most spring breakers opted to save their money and “gathered at Piedmont [Park], Underground Atlanta, Lenox and the AU center.”<sup>19</sup> Freaknik visitors developed a system of partying by rejecting attempts by businesses to charge them, which both saved them money and served to further aggravate Atlanta’s government that denied them access to large portions of the city.

In spite of the fact that these and other residents held the view that Freaknik presented no positive aspects, ELQ communications president Cristina Copeland utilized the huge turnout of Freaknik ‘93. Copeland organized over \$20,000 in scholarships towards the Atlanta Dollars for Scholars program, which provided youths in Atlanta area public housing with scholarship opportunities. On the campus of Clark Atlanta, college prep workshops and panels, including one titled “The Deteriorating State of Education in this Country and its Impact on the Black Community” were held.<sup>20</sup> In 1994, when Freaknik was officially known as the

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Robinson and Anne Rochell, “Traffic Jamming Hard-Partying Freakniks Clog City Streets,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 25, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Vickers, “Freaknik ‘93 City to Seek Better Control of Bash,” *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 25, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Della Pulliam, “CollegeFest: Freaknik ‘93 Promises to have Meaning,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 22, 1993.

Atlanta Black College Spring Break, large portions of the proceeds from various activities went to the Atlanta University Center students, where the Atlanta Student Forum established a scholarship program.<sup>21</sup>

As the years progressed and many within Atlanta's political arena came to discourage Freaknik, these scholarship drives and college workshops were never weighed against the negative aspects of the event, which came to grab headlines across the country. With proper planning and an active role by the city government, this festival could have contributed huge amounts of money to the school system and education of Atlanta's youth.

Besides ignoring Freaknik's potential to support academic programs, past historians have given the festival's spatial composition short shrift. In 1969, Interstate 285 was completed, circumscribing an area informally known as the "Perimeter." Scholar Charles Rutheiser explains that I-285 acted as a blockade to many white residents in the suburbs from the metro center of Atlanta. To these residents, "everything on the inside [of I-285 was] considered to be the moral equivalent of the inner city: a racialized place of danger and decay."<sup>22</sup> For white residents of the affluent neighborhoods of Midtown and Piedmont Park, students partying in the streets undermined the long-standing racial segregation of these neighborhoods and to white residents on the outside of I-285, the idea of black youth acting irresponsibly undermined their perceived suburban safety as the "dangers" of the city were pushed closer to them. The issue of placing supposedly

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<sup>21</sup> "Atlanta Black College Spring Break '94 Fete," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 1, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 83.

dangerous youth in predominately white neighborhoods is at the heart of Freaknik and a critical component in the cruising culture associated with the party.

Krista A. Thompson, one of the few academics to have written explicitly about Freaknik, examines the role of spatial politics and cruising during the party. Thompson argues that Freaknik “can be located within...[the] history and tradition of street-based protest rituals throughout the African diasporas” and focuses her study on the “alternative meanings of space” utilized by Freaknik participants.<sup>23</sup> Borrowing the term from Charles Rutheiser, Thompson examines Atlanta as an “autopolis” because of the city’s dependence on driving. According to Thompson, “Freaknic participants, in the tradition of carnival, embody and exaggerate Atlanta’s own development and complete dependence on transportation. Freaknic is the autopolis turned upside down.”<sup>24</sup> Thompson’s work correctly situates Freaknik within a larger tradition of modern carnival and inversion rituals, but lacks any significant discussion of the civil rights legacy contributing to the rhetoric used by participants. Focusing on white Atlanta’s past, Thompson largely overlooks the reasons why Atlanta as a city was such a prime spot for a modern carnival ritual.

The unorganized, free-flowing nature of Freaknik lead to partying focused primarily in the streets. Two promoters, Marcus and Jason Geer, who organized festivities in Piedmont Park, blamed the city for the traffic jams because of their

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<sup>23</sup> Thompson, “Performing Visibility,”27.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, “Preforming Visibility,”41.

Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York and London: Verso, 1996), 82.

While Thompson uses the spelling Freaknic in her work, the most common spelling and the one used throughout this paper is Freaknik, although they are essentially interchangeable.

refusal to grant permits for use of public space.<sup>25</sup> By operating as a roving illegal party, Freaknik participants adopted strategies to enjoy themselves despite the city's refusal to grant permits for park use. James Costen, President of the Interdenominational Theological Center and supporter of Atlanta's civic body working alongside Freaknik, attacked Mayor Campbell for his refusal to adequately plan for the incoming students, claiming that the traffic plans made by the city "had them circling perimeters, vendors had been denied access and park permits." Dr. Louis Sullivan, President of the Morehouse School of Medicine located within the Atlanta University Center alongside the Interdenominational Theological Center, echoed similar sentiments as President Costen when he claimed, "we don't want a tragedy."<sup>26</sup> The African American youth that made up the party illustrated their power and called into question Atlanta's ability to host large groups of people, a significant issue in the years leading up to Atlanta hosting the 1996 Olympics. Representing the academic establishment, Dr. Costen and Sullivan squarely placed themselves and their universities in opposition to the outright dismissal of planning that came to be a mainstay in Mayor Campbell's relationship to Freaknik. Along with crowd control issues, Freaknik brought to light the issue of where in the city large crowds of African American youth were considered to be welcome.

Gridlock throughout Atlanta became more than a minor nuisance for city officials or a racially-based fear for residents as Freaknik served to undercut citizens' faith in Atlanta's ability to host large events while simultaneously ensuring

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<sup>25</sup> S.A. Reid, "Residents Voice Concerns on Handling of Future Freakniks," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 28, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> "City's 'Freaknik' Policies Concern Leaders," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 18, 1995.



safety. Security became a key concern for residents who argued that fire trucks and emergency service vehicles were unable to get through the gridlock. Along with safety issues, the traffic created by Freaknik disrupted business ventures and, for all practical purposes, shut down major parts of the city. Exploiting Atlanta's history of trouble hosting large crowds, Freaknik participants exasperated an already pressing issue.

During the 1970's, Atlanta hosted the Ramblin' Raft Race on the Chattahoochee River with crowds reaching up to 300,000 people. After complaints of "drug and alcohol use, trespassing, littering, and nudity," the event was finally cancelled when a person drowned during the 1980 race.<sup>27</sup> Even small-scale events such as Atlanta Braves games drew complaints from residents about traffic and noise.<sup>28</sup> What separated Atlanta from other American cities who struggled to host large events was the near complete dependence on driving. Atlanta's train system, the MARTA, while reaching various points throughout the city, has never succeeded in convincing residents to take public transportation. While some if not all cities in the Sun Belt have poor public transportation system, the sheer size of Atlanta exasperated this problem greatly. Combining the large driving population with fact that cruising culture was a staple aspect of Freaknik led to huge traffic problems throughout the party. The desire to cruise and the avoidance of public

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<sup>27</sup> S.A. Reid, "Can City Control Crowds? After Freaknik, Some Wonder if Atlanta can handle really big events," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 2, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

transportation led to Atlanta consistently being overwhelmed during the party.<sup>29</sup> After Freaknik '93, residents of Midtown threatened to sue the city, and Michael Hauptman, the lawyer representing the Midtown residents who largely supported actions against the party and desired Freaknik's demise, stated that he believed "Freaknik was just the straw that broke the camel's back."<sup>30</sup> Crowd control had long been an issue facing Atlanta, and Freaknik's lack of organization, coupled with the desire of participants to cruise caused distress in the city's largely white midtown community.

During 1993 and early '94, Atlanta residents from the mostly white neighborhoods of Midtown and Piedmont Park voiced their complaints to city officials and forced them to establish a traffic plan that would adequately deal with the influx of students. Special Operations Major Wayne Mock claimed that the city would "set up a perimeter with barricades, and each intersection [would] be staffed by police," but in reality little had been done to plan for Freaknik '94.<sup>31</sup> Even though Chicago-based Freakfest and Atlanta Mandrill Productions sought to participate in the event, the city-sanctioned Atlanta Student Forum held the most power. The ASF was a group that consisted of "representatives of AUC student government, the city, police and business[es]" that sought to come together to plan for Freaknik.<sup>32</sup> At its

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<sup>29</sup> For a discussion on MARTA, including the racial dimensions of the train system please see Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-197.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Bono, "Campbell Says Freaknik Gridlock is 'Not Going to Happen Again,'" *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, January 27, 1994.

<sup>32</sup> S.A. Reid, "Lining up for Freaknik: Three separate groups promoting activities for spring student bash," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, February 5, 1994.

heart the ASF was an organizational structure whose support transcended a strictly political or economic mindset and served as the voice for local HBCU students. While Freakfest and Mandrill Productions offered package deals to cash in on the event with bus trips from around the country, the ASF attempted to plan events, set up venues, and secure sponsorships. Kathleen Bertrand, a member of the ASF, called the planning “painstaking and slow.”<sup>33</sup> Even before Freaknik ‘94 had started, blame was being cast throughout the ASF. The late start of the committee, coupled with internal bickering, led to Atlanta being woefully unprepared for the arrival of hundreds of thousands of students. The city went into the weekend of April 21<sup>st</sup> with the ASF changing the official name of the event from Freaknik to the Atlanta Black College Spring Break, but aside from semantics, little had changed from the previous year.<sup>34</sup>

In the end, Councilwoman Carolyn Long Banks championed the only substantive policy decisions undertaken by city officials in anticipation of Freaknik. Elected in a citywide contest in 1980, Banks was Atlanta’s first black female Councilwoman and became an outspoken advocate for Freaknik, aligning herself against Mayor Campbell on nearly every occasion. Days before Freaknik ‘94, Atlanta, under pressure from Banks co-sponsored the event and gave \$175,000 for sanitation and park services.<sup>35</sup> This last minute effort by Atlanta proved to be too

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<sup>33</sup> S.A. Reid and Robert J. Vickers, “Weekend Report: Planning ‘slow’ for Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 27, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> “Freaknik Problems Still Unresolved,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 30, 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Vickers and Charmagne Helton, “Municipal Court Special Session set During Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 19, 1994.

little to adequately prepare for the coming students who sought to party in the streets.

As 200,000-plus people rushed into the city during Freaknik '94, it became painfully obvious that plans had been poorly laid and executed as the party took on a life of its own. Festivals and concerts were largely ignored, and instead students rented the most luxurious and grandiose cars available and took to the city's streets. Cruising was the main activity associated with Freaknik during the '93-'95 period as it became a means to both attract members of the opposite sex and to keep the party mobile.<sup>36</sup> Watching the party roll by, a resident in the surrounding Piedmont Park area said the difference between Freaknik and other events in the park was its intensity: "It is so much all at once...The traffic, the noise, the constant cruising, kids sitting out of the windows of their cars, blaring music."<sup>37</sup> This observer's opinion becomes especially enlightening when compared with acknowledged protest tactics of the 1960s.

Robin D.G. Kelley's *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* examines the idea of noise as a form of "opposition to Jim Crow, before an audience, in a powerful way."<sup>38</sup> When black passengers in Birmingham, Alabama were segregated on public transit, they complained about the racist nature of Jim Crow in loud voices, so their words would carry into the white portion of the bus. Kelley

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<sup>36</sup> Don Plummer, "Freaknik Whats Going on: Traffic Hits a Standstill as Partiers leave park Police struggle to restore crawl," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 24, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Bono, "Freaknik: The Neighborhoods and the party, Midtowners hoping for best, bracing for worst," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 14, 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 70.

explains that the “voices themselves, especially the loud and profane, literally penetrated and occupied white spaces.”<sup>39</sup> Rap music, strongly associated with African American culture since the early ‘80s, can certainly be described as “loud and profane” and was used as a tool to enter into the white neighborhoods historically denied to local African American residents.

In spite of these parallels, or perhaps because of them, city officials involved in the planning of Freaknik 1995 sought to obstruct party goers’ access to municipal facilities and infrastructure. In response to proposals from Mayor Campbell that freeway ramps be closed to attendees, the Atlanta City Council, under the leadership of Councilwoman Banks, passed a resolution to open public facilities to Freaknik partiers.<sup>40</sup> By stating, “when you’re talking about closing (highway) exits, you’re talking about apartheid,” Banks publicly opposed the mayor.<sup>41</sup> In addition, Banks explained to the media that she had been contacted by some Atlanta police officers that claimed “this is a plan that we’re going to have to kill some kids in order to make a point. We’re going to have to...back up the mayor.”<sup>42</sup>

In the end, arguments such as these left Banks, who was one of the few within the municipal arena to consider the consequences of obstruction and

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<sup>39</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Charmagne Helton, “Split city council issues welcome to Freaknik participants,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 18, 1995.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Charmagne Helton, “Freaknik ‘95; Controversial comments; Banks stands by prediction of carnage,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 19, 1995.

Despite repeated attempts from the press, Councilwomen Carolyn Banks refused to name any of the Atlanta police officers who contacted her.

inaction, was facing huge organizational tasks with a tiny window of time before students began to arrive. While Banks was unable to organize an adequate traffic plan, she avoided what could have been a catastrophe by opening up public facilities. These efforts aside, Banks was unable to compile a complete management plan for Freaknik 1995.

Dozens upon dozens of cars, backed up for blocks, simultaneously playing different songs created a cacophony that penetrated into the white sphere of Atlanta. Piedmont Park and the surrounding areas represented to the African American population of Atlanta an area off limits, at least in terms of purchasing a home. Despite that many visitors to Freaknik were from outside the city, the fact that most major promoters and organizers lived in the Atlanta metro area meant that they were highly aware of the issues of space at play in the event, even if the visitors didn't understand the significance of their actions. While race relations in the Piedmont Park and Midtown neighborhoods were not as dramatic as Jim Crow segregation, Freaknik participants utilized civil disobedience to make themselves, and their culture, present in the lives of these residents who largely came to oppose the event. As traffic backed up around downtown expressways, exits became spontaneous parties when Freaknikers who could not get to a venue, or chose not to, partied in the streets. By turning up their radios and parking in the streets, African American youth utilized their cars and stereos to challenge the city of Atlanta and the residents opposed to the event.

Comparing Freaknik to other events held in Piedmont Park, the number of complaints lodged against the partiers suggests that race played a significant factor

in forming residents' opinions about the event. Several editorials highlight the polarizing effect that this incoming wave of people had on local residents. Joella Newman of Marietta, a 22-year-old African American, expressed the views of many young blacks in Atlanta. In response to complaints of litter, she responded, "after every event held outdoors in Atlanta, there's going to be trash."<sup>43</sup> Cutting to the point, Newman stated, "honestly, I think white people are afraid when a bunch of black people get together. Get over it."<sup>44</sup> Tucker stated after Freaknik '94, that "Freaknik has taken on an unfortunate racial tinge. It is difficult to discuss the subject rationally because of all the racial baggage that attaches to it. That's a problem; the city desperately needs a sensible discussion on the ramifications of the huge street party."<sup>45</sup>

Since this "sensible discussion" never materialized, the citizens of Atlanta were unable to adequately develop plans for the party. This is not to say, however, that rumblings of discussion were not heard. The predominately white residents of Midtown even threatened to hold a "Midtown-nik" protest in front of Mayor Campbell's yard if the event was not handled differently from previous years.<sup>46</sup> On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1994, the *AJC* claimed that "this week, the Constitution has received 104 letters on the Annual Atlanta Black College Spring Break...Nearly all the letter

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<sup>43</sup> Joella Newman, "Viewpoints Freaknik '93 No Need for Freaknik," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 29, 1993.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Cynthia Tucker, "Freaknik illustrates Atlanta's own racial fault line," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 27, 1994.

<sup>46</sup> S.A. Reid, "Mayor's home site of Freaknik protest," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 29, 1994.

writers said race is not an issue here.”<sup>47</sup> Whether or not race was a significant factor in forming anti-Freaknik sentiments in the city is a moot point, the fact is that any criticism was perceived as racist by both white and black Atlantans. John Hardie of Roswell presented a unique stance when he explained, “Since these students are black, the city not only condones these activities, it co-sponsors the event,” while African American Atlanta resident Vickie M. Warren claimed, “The media can always find the negative in our youth instead of the positive.”<sup>48</sup> The simple fact of the matter is that both white and black residents of Atlanta were responsible for creating the racial hysteria surrounding Freaknik ‘93 and ‘94, which ultimately led to trepidation of publically criticizing the party and greatly hindered any productive discussion of the event.<sup>49</sup> In the end, the lack of a productive planning forum led to what many citizens perceived as chaos in the streets of Atlanta.

As Freaknik ‘94 descended on the city, its participants concerned themselves not with traffic control or noise management, but with seeing and being seen. With students traveling from across the country, the 72 hours spent partying were a blend of ostentatious appearances and (supposed) hyper-sexuality. Almost all those interviewed during Freaknik ‘94 made references to attracting a suitor. Tiffany Gray, a 22 year-old Tennessee State University Junior said that she enjoyed “the variety; all shapes, all colors. You could meet your husband here,” and Craig Williams, a student at Morehouse, aptly described the desire to attract attention when he said,

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<sup>47</sup> “The Fallout Continues,” *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 5, 1994.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



“You’ve got guys with boa constrictors around their necks, girls in outlandish outfits, and people driving fancy cars...During Freaknik, you do whatever it takes to get someone to notice you.”<sup>50</sup>

Some of these activities demonstrate an attempt by partiers to assert their right to participate in the youth culture that helps define suburban, white America. Scholar Greg Dimitriadis explains that the idea of “youth” was created by “white middle-class values and mores, at a point of relative prosperity in the United States [the 1950’s].” Youth was a “privileged in-between stage, a buffer zone between the seeming innocence of childhood and the rigors of adulthood” which, due to the lack of prosperity historically afforded to African Americans, was largely denied them. For Freaknik participants, this event marked an attempt by the African American community to capture the notions of “youth” afforded to their white counterparts.<sup>51</sup> Combining the desire for youth as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood with the spatial politics espoused by Kelley highlight how the youthful actions employed by participants such as dancing, playing loud music, and fraternizing came to challenge those against the party.

Freaknik’s function as a forum enabled commentary on Atlanta’s layout and structure. Mark A. Thompson’s work, “Black-White Residential Segregation in Atlanta,” in *The Atlanta Paradox*, explores Atlanta’s perception of its own racial segregation. Examining the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, Thompson first addresses the

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<sup>50</sup> Robert J. Vickers, “Freaknik: What’s Going On Boy meet Girls Visiting Students are scoping out the opposite sex; college megaparty spills out into Downtown streets,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 23, 1994.

<sup>51</sup> Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001), 70.

most obvious reason for segregation-economics-and concludes that while this plays a role, it fails to explain why African Americans and whites making over \$100,000 a year are even more segregated than their humbler counterparts.<sup>52</sup> Once Thompson concludes that economics is unable to be the sole factor in the segregation of Atlanta's neighborhoods, the perception that barriers exist within Atlanta's housing market presents itself as a major force. Basing his statistical analysis on a series of interviews, Thompson states that "93 percent of blacks felt that . . . whites will not sell or rent homes to blacks" and that "89 percent believed that blacks miss out on good housing because real estate agents will not show, rent, or sell homes to blacks."<sup>53</sup> The economic boom during the post WWII years in Atlanta led to historically white areas consolidating their gains, a process that continued long into the 1990s. These residents purposeful isolation was called into question by partiers whose presence challenged their hegemony in enclaves of white domination.

These pockets of white development enjoyed a zealously guarded pedigree that stretched back over half a century. During the postwar era and stretching into the 1990s, Atlanta experienced considerable economic and municipal growth and the Chamber of Commerce proclaimed it "a city without limits."<sup>54</sup> Even though Atlanta presented itself as a bustling and economically booming urban center, the "benefits of growth have been most unevenly distributed across the metropolitan region...with the exception of a few privileged enclaves, the predominately black

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<sup>52</sup> Mark A. Thompson, "Black-White Residential Ssegregation in Atlanta," in *The Atlanta Paradox*, ed. David L. Sjoquist (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 91.

<sup>53</sup> Thompson, "Black-White Residential Segregation,"109.

<sup>54</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 74.

urban core has languished.”<sup>55</sup> Between 1990 and 1995, Atlanta “led the nation in job growth” and yet “unemployment in the central city grew fivefold during that same period.”<sup>56</sup> During the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Atlanta’s residents experienced great economic growth distributed largely along racial lines, even though a black upper and middle class existed within Atlanta, their white counterparts grew at a much greater rate during the late twentieth century. The inequality of wealth became a key component of Freaknik’s inversion, as African American youth flooded into neighborhoods, where access was largely denied to them through perceived racial injustices, tangible economic gaps, and willful obstruction. This racial separation of economics and geography would prove to have grave consequences for the business elite in their views of the party.

Susannah Walker in her article, “Black Dollar Power: Assessing African American Consumerism since 1945,” discusses black consumerism as an important civil rights issue. During her discussion of advertising companies during the early 1960’s, Walker cites “cultural and geographical separation of black America” as a critical reason African Americans developed different spending patterns than their white counterparts. This separation, “blinded white advertisers to the potential of the black middle class,” which became a key issue that nearly led to a boycott for one Atlanta business.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 75.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Susannah Walker, “Black Dollar Power: Assessing African American Consumerism since 1945,” in *African American Urban History Since World War II*, ed. By Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe. W. Trotter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 377, 384.

While some businesses flourished during the frenzy of the weekend, the Atlanta Marriott Marquis Downtown became entangled in controversy. On April 14, the hotel's Diversity Task force, a group made up of employees from differing levels, sent a memo to their employees announcing the hotel would not release any of its remaining rooms. This memo was leaked to the press and caused a great deal of censure from the NAACP and the ACLU.<sup>58</sup> Georgia ACLU director Teresa Nelson stated rather bluntly, "This policy is racist." After phone tests at selected hotels in Atlanta came up inconclusive in proving discrimination, the Georgia ACLU continued to watch the situation.<sup>59</sup> On Thursday, April 21, the Marriott Marquis rescinded their previous position and decided to book rooms. The hotel management had received calls from many people, including Mayor Bill Campbell, who sought to get the Marriott to change its stance in an effort to avert what was seen as a racially motivated decision. Rumors of protest ultimately prompted the change of opinion by the hotel staff and served to illustrate to many African Americans the racial recrimination hidden in Atlanta's reaction to Freaknik.<sup>60</sup> The controversy surrounding the Marriott Marquis serves as a microcosm of the spatial politics at play during Freaknik as African American youth challenged whites' obstruction of access to their spheres of Atlanta.

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<sup>58</sup> S.A Reid, "Freaknik: Plans and Preparations Hotels cute available rooms, sparking Condemnation," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 21, 1994.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> S.A Reid, "Freaknik: What's Going On Hotel reservation policy reversed in face of protest," *Atlanta Journal Constiution*, April 22, 1994.

While the Marriott Marquis debacle highlighted the white fear of African American youth entering their sphere of the city, Rutheiser highlights issues of memory and ownership that prove helpful when examining the racial dimensions associated with Freaknik. Speaking about the dramatic differences in economic standing Rutheiser claims, “Freaknik is not so much about the event itself, but a manifestation of the racial and class divides that have been deepened and widened over the last thirty years.”<sup>61</sup> Freaknik came to represent not just a party, but also rather an attempt by African Americans from across the country to claim Atlanta as their own. Rutheiser explains how Freaknik represented the contesting claims of ownership to Martin Luther King Jr. and a racially charged negotiation of who could lay claim to the civil rights legacy and the city of Atlanta. The idea of Atlanta as a black Mecca “followed that African-Americans around the United States, and not just in Atlanta, enjoyed particular claims upon the city” that entitled them to the opportunity to visit in any manner deemed fit by the African American community.<sup>62</sup> Freaknik became so racially charged not just because of the event itself, but because the event represented contested assertions of ownership over the city of Atlanta that had been present for decades. These claims created a rift not only between Freaknik supporters and opponents, but also between generations of African Americans.

Just as Freaknik claimed a direct tie to Atlanta’s civil rights past, Manning Marable, in his work, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, examines the relationship

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<sup>61</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 138.

<sup>62</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 133.

between modern black America and the traditional civil rights movement. While he is correct in framing the goals and failures of the traditional movement within the mindset of youthful African Americans, he oversimplifies the relationship modern Black Americans had with the traces left behind from Jim Crow. Marable argues, “African Americans coming to maturity in the 1980s and 1990s have never personally experienced Jim Crow segregation,” but operate under a narrow construct of Jim Crow framed around run-ins with racist mobs, tear gas, fire hoses, and police dogs. In order to understand the connections between Freaknik and the historical civil rights movement, interpretations of discrimination must be broad-based. Citing a University of Chicago study, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* explains, “Blacks were forced to live in neighborhoods of much poorer quality than whites with identical educational backgrounds and family incomes.” For Freaknik participants who were denied access to traditionally white parts of Atlanta, this silent discrimination became a cornerstone of their protest, which only increased as the actions of Chief Harvard and Mayor Campbell took on more restrictive qualities.<sup>63</sup>

In spite of these measures, however, the event seemed to have taken on a life of its own. In the aftermath of Freaknik '94, Councilwoman Carolyn Long Banks admitted that it could not be stopped. “I really don’t think it can be ended...the

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<sup>63</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 188, 206.

students have a right to come to the city of Atlanta. They look at this as the Mecca of the civil rights movement.”<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps quietly acknowledging Freaknik’s inevitability, the mayor’s office answered questions from the public about its impact on the city through press secretary Nick Gold in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*.<sup>65</sup> When asked what impression Atlanta left on the Freaknikers, the mayor’s office said, “They were impressed with Atlanta as a Mecca for African Americans and said they felt comfortable in Atlanta because of its civil rights heritage. In a sense, many said, Atlanta was everyone’s home.”<sup>66</sup> Considering this sentiment was coming from Mayor Campbell’s office, which largely discouraged the event and dismissed ties to the civil rights movement, it becomes clear this sense of home place was a strongly shared emotion to those visiting Atlanta. To many students, Freaknik represented a chance to walk in the same shoes as their civil rights movement forbearers. While not fighting for the right to vote or against Jim Crow segregation, these participants forced Atlanta residents and the city government to face the racial inequality plaguing their city. If Atlanta, the city with such a rich history of racial progress, would not welcome the students, then Freaknik participants would take the chance to continue to point out the error of the city’s ways. For Freaknik 1994, those errors proved almost overwhelming.

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<sup>64</sup> Doug Monroe, “Freaknik Fallout From the Festivities Monroe Drive,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 1, 1994.

<sup>65</sup> “Freaknik Fallout from the Festivities: Q & A on the News Accessing this year, looking ahead to 1995,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 1, 1994.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

On September 22, 1994, Mayor Bill Campbell released his decision on how to deal with Freaknik '95: discourage it. Campbell stated that the city's new policy "will be zero tolerance for any infraction."<sup>67</sup> Any students in town who blocked traffic would be arrested. In addressing his switch from attempting to work with Freaknik to discouraging it, he claimed, "we have tried our best to make the event work . . . it is fairly clear that Atlanta cannot accommodate it."<sup>68</sup> As the word of the mayor's new policy spread around the country, many students believed what Campbell wanted to do was unrealistic. Students and African Americans from around the country began to transform their opinions of the mayor many had previously viewed as an exemplar of liberal African American leaders. A Morehouse man and Midtown resident said, "I know when a phony politician is trying to improve his image. I expect more from Campbell, considering he is a person of color."<sup>69</sup>

While it is difficult to know the exact reasons why Campbell decided to take such a hard-line stance against Freaknik, he did receive a letter from Atlanta business organizations calling for its end. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau and Central Atlanta Progress penned a joint resolution in June of 1994 and sent it to Campbell.<sup>70</sup> While for years it was becoming painfully obvious to Campbell and city officials that Freaknik was unmanageable, the fact that major economic players in Atlanta were now urging for a change in the

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<sup>67</sup> Gail Hagans and S.A. Reid, "Stop next spring's Freaknik? Won't happen students say," *Atlanta Journal of Constitution*, September 24, 1994.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> "Letters One Weekend," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 2, 1994.

<sup>70</sup> "Inside Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, September 25, 1994.



handling of Freaknik led to heavy criticism of the mayor. Along with this letter from major Atlanta businesses, Atlanta received a \$100 million grant from the Empowerment Zone, a fund to uplift distressed communities. Managing the money from the grant, “the mayor . . . made himself the administration’s sole standard-bearer” in both Empowerment Zone meetings and planning for Freaknik. With Freaknik ‘95 approaching and Campbell stifling any organization or discussion, the negative influence of Freaknik on Atlanta’s economy and its disruption of the convention industry seemed to consume the mind and efforts of Mayor Campbell as he focused his attention on planning for the Comdex Convention which was scheduled over the same weekend.

The Comdex Convention, a gathering of computer technologists and software engineers, was expected to bring in over \$40 million, twice that of Freaknik. Vincent Polito, the managing director of Comdex, said, “if our event goes poorly as a result of the Freaknik crowd, it would seriously jeopardize my ability to come back. So Atlanta does have a lot riding on the success of this.”<sup>71</sup> Since Campbell kept the conversation and planning of Freaknik ‘95 at a standstill, many within the municipal arena and larger Atlanta community criticized him for turning his back on Atlanta’s black population. As the event inched closer and closer, Mayor Campbell became a lightning rod of condemnation for his inadequate preparation.

The most infamous of the critiques hurled against Campbell came from Councilwoman Banks. In an interview, she stated that she “hope[ed] the mayor isn’t planning on having a Bull Connor and George Wallace or Lester Maddox-type

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<sup>71</sup>Ronald Smothers, “A fretful Atlanta awaits a deluge,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1995.

government.”<sup>72</sup> Banks threw the first stone in a series of critiques steeped in the language of the civil rights movement. In response to Banks’ comments, Campbell said it was “such an unfortunate choice of words that it does not deserve a response.”<sup>73</sup> Many condemned Banks’s statement and her words led to a further racial divide over Freaknik. Some citizens defended Campbell’s decision as well-reasoned and free of racial bias, while Banks was seen as “prone to cry racist every time she cannot have her way,” and dividing blacks against whites and neighborhoods against neighborhoods.<sup>74</sup> Basing her language in the rhetoric of the traditional civil rights movement, Banks placed the Freaknik debate within the larger struggle of youth and the historical movement.

While Banks argued that Mayor Campbell was trying to force Freaknik away from certain areas of the city in an effort to protect the economic gains of the convention industry, Harvey K. Newman, explores the role of geography in Atlanta’s tourism efforts. His article, “Race and the Tourist Bubble in Downtown Atlanta,” examines Atlanta’s attempt at attracting tourists and the impact of this action on race relations with its African American residents. Newman explains, “Atlanta’s downtown tourist space segregates visitors and office workers inside a bubble that is secured, protected, and normalized.”<sup>75</sup> Examining what Atlanta sought in tourists is critical to understanding why Freaknik presented such problems to the city. Not

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<sup>72</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon and Charmagne Helton, “Campbell defends stance on Freaknik: Mayor’s Decision called ‘premature,’” *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 6, 1994.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Bill H. Oppenheim, “City Voices Readers’ Letters: Tell us what you think Freaknik’s Potential,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 20, 1994.

2002): 314.

confined to the “tourist bubble,” Freaknik spilled across the city and into areas deemed unacceptable for African American youth. Newman claims that “decision making in Atlanta throughout most of the twentieth century reflected a close partnership between business and government,” which may explain why in the years prior to 1995, the discussion was not how to discourage Freaknik, but how to manage it.<sup>76</sup>

In October of '94, an anonymous flier was circulated to several prominent Atlantans including Coretta Scott King. In the flier Campbell is called an “‘Uncle Tom’ and [the flier] says it is time to let white Atlantans know ‘who really runs this town.’”<sup>77</sup> Freaknik '95 had been transformed into a racially charged event as African Americans from across the country saw the actions of the mayor as race betrayal. The uncompromising stance taken by the mayor truncated what Freaknik could have become. Tommie Butler of Atlanta, a Freaknik organizer, envisioned a Freaknik with job fairs, workshops, college recruitments, sport exhibitions and major performing artists, and believed that “the young people will be touched by history and play a part in it.”<sup>78</sup> While across the political and racial spectrum, it was obvious that Freaknik caused major issues for Atlanta, the fact that Campbell opposed it before it could ever come to fruition caused many students and leaders distress.

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<sup>77</sup> Charmagne Helton, “City Officials inundated by phony Freaknik flier,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 22, 1994.

<sup>78</sup> Tommie Butler, “City Voices Readers’ Letters: Tell us what you think Freaknik’s Potential,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 20, 1994.

During the planning of Freaknik '95, when racial tensions were at their height, the city refused to cooperate with T.W. Williams, an organizer for Freedom Fest who worked along with groups such as the SCLC and the Concerned Black Clergy. Williams hoped Freedom Fest would have an "ecumenical breakfast with SCLC...[and a concert] against oppression in any form such as racism, sexism and disabilities," but Williams tried to register with the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau "to no avail." Scheduled to be held over a 2 week period between April 18<sup>th</sup>-April 30<sup>th</sup>, Freedom Fest marked the first real attempt by civil rights leaders, community activists, the clergy, and students to truly change the face of Freaknik. Focusing on community events and catering to those who "would like to be entertained, but not be as freaky," Freedom Fest garnered great support from activists and students, but ultimately Campbell's refusal to cooperate with the organizers kept the project from ever becoming a significant attraction during Freaknik.<sup>79</sup>

In January 1995, city officials added fuel to the fire by sending out a statement to 137 HBCUs across the country urging them to keep students from attending Freaknik. Stating, "It is not in (your students') best interest to attend Freaknik 1995," this letter sought to stop Freaknik and its only visible source, colleges.<sup>80</sup> While the city believed schools would help in deterring Freaknikers, a

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<sup>79</sup> Della Pulliam, "A New Name, Image for College Students Celebration," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 6, 1995.

<sup>80</sup> "Colleges urged to discourage students from attending festival," *Associated Press*, February 16, 1995.

senior at Spelman named Darla Miles explained that her friends from as far away as Fort Worth, Texas, all the way to Iowa State University “heard rumors that [Freaknik] is going to be canceled but they’re coming down anyway.”<sup>81</sup> Many students understood the reasons why Campbell had taken his anti-Freaknik stance, but believed that the party was “not the mayor’s to cancel.”<sup>82</sup> When comparing past Freakniks with the upcoming party in ‘95, projections were that over 300,000 people would attend, but unlike in previous years, several factors were working against the event. The city’s stance against the “anything goes” atmosphere, the shortage of hotel rooms because it coincided with the Comdex computer convention, and the fear of police reprisal all contributed to Freaknik ‘95 representing a drastic change from prior years.<sup>83</sup>

As the event approached, Campbell began to ease up on his hard-line position while attempting to appear that he had not changed his stance. When media outlets attacked Campbell for softening his position on Freaknik, Campbell stressed that the event would not happen as it previously had, and that just because he was now welcoming visitors, they would still be held accountable for breaking the law. In the face of racially charged criticism coming from all angles, Campbell had little choice but to change his stance on Freaknik. While in previous years the connection between Freaknik and the civil rights movement was mentioned in passing, once

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<sup>81</sup> Charmagne Helton and Douglas A. Blackmon, “Freaknik ‘Coming, Welcome or Not’; Black students making plans to party, ignore mayor’s request,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 11, 1995.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> “Get Ready for Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 15, 1995.

Mayor Campbell and city officials sought to discourage the event entirely, it was transformed.

This transformation of Freaknik from a party to a political statement can be traced back to the work of James C. Scott who examines subjugated peoples who define the dominant image of their society. In his work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance; Hidden Transcript*, Scott at the ways subjugated peoples have utilized subtle and not-so-subtle acts of resistance. Scott defines a “hidden transcript” as consisting “of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.”<sup>84</sup> Applying this framework to Atlanta illustrates that Freaknik can, and should, be viewed as a form of hidden transcript in the sense that it challenges the public transcript of a city “too busy to hate.” The reality of Freaknik ‘95 showed that, far from being too busy, the city prepared to make suppressing the event a priority.

Campbell’s hardline plan was to set up a draconian police state over the weekend of April 21st. With Piedmont Park, downtown Peachtree Street, and other predominately white areas off-limits to cruisers, the actions of Mayor Campbell only served to reinforce the belief that he was acting out of racial sentiments.<sup>85</sup> With no city support and no official organizers, Atlanta entered into the weeks before Freaknik ‘95 ill-prepared and with charges of racism being cast across the board. Freaknik promoters all over the country acknowledged that the “city needs to get

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<sup>84</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4-5.

<sup>85</sup> Kathy Scruggs, “Preparing For Freaknik: City plans crackdown on cruising, Students revelers who violate the law,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 15, 1995.

ready with park permits, sanitation and an acceptable traffic plan.”<sup>86</sup> With checkpoints restricting traffic, a Freaknik promoter described the actions of the city as a “human rights violation reminiscent of Nazi Germany.”<sup>87</sup> This statement is obviously over-blown, but it is critical to understanding Freaknik ‘95 as the breaking point in the story of this party. On March 21, 1995 Mayor Campbell met with 500 students from the Atlanta University Center to explain that “the message is the same (as previous years). Everyone is welcome, but we expect them to obey the laws.”<sup>88</sup> While the mayor’s appeal for law and order might seem benign, it was not received as such in the African American community.

Civil rights activist Hosea Williams, who had previously asked Mayor Campbell to “stop Uncle Tommin’ for white folks,” sought to invoke the civil rights legacy to challenge the attack on Freaknik.<sup>89</sup> Williams and “state Rep. Henrietta Canty said . . . they would give the mayor until April 4, the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, to drop plans for the crackdown.”<sup>90</sup> Williams eventually did call off a proposed nonviolent demonstration in support of Freaknik because of Campbell’s changed tune, but many students were still skeptical.<sup>91</sup> Nicole

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<sup>86</sup> Charmagne Helton, “Freaknik Promoter: ‘People are Coming,’” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 16, 1995.

<sup>87</sup> “It’s Wise to Prepare for Freaknik Traffic,” *Atlanta Journal Constituion*, March 17, 1995.

<sup>88</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon and Mara Rose Williams, “Campbell on defensive; Mayor Denies flip-flop on Freaknik; Aide: He said event ‘will not happen as it did last year,’” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 22, 1995.

<sup>89</sup> Janis L. Magin, “Anxiety Abounds a Month Before Controversial Black Spring Fling,” *Associated Press*, March 22, 1995.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

Dixon, a freshman at Clark Atlanta who attended the meeting with Campbell where he stated all were welcome, echoed the sentiments of many students who believed that Campbell “didn’t come here with an open mind. He already had his agenda, that Freaknik is not welcome. He is not to be swayed and the students will not be pushed aside. The students are not fighting just for Freaknik; they are fighting for their civil rights.”<sup>92</sup>

In the minds of some city leaders, the need for that fight was brought about not by partiers’ indiscretion, but a lack of municipal planning. Looking back at Atlanta’s handling of previous Freakniks, Williams and Councilwoman Carolyn Long Banks viewed the city’s history of poor planning as the cause of Freaknik’s problems, not the students themselves. As the meeting at the AUC library began, Campbell told Williams that he would not continue the discussion with him present.<sup>93</sup> Isolating himself and straddling the Freaknik fence, Campbell sought to achieve an impossible goal, pleasing both African American activists and students supporting Freaknik, and alleviating the fears of many in Atlanta’s community. As events later proved, those fears ran deep.

In a disturbing turn of events reminiscent of the white segregationist response to civil rights protest a generation before; the Georgia National Guard readjusted their drill schedule over the weekend of Freaknik’95. SCLC president Dr. Joseph Lowery stated, “We do not need the National Guard. What we need is a

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<sup>92</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon and Mara Rose Williams, “Campbell on Defensive.” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 22, 1995.

<sup>93</sup> Mara Rose Williams and Charmagne Helton, “Students Angry over Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 22, 1995.



community of Atlanta, with the mayor, county commission, students...working together.” In addition to Dr. Lowery, Atlanta NAACP president Dr. Robert Threatt, president of the 100 Black Men of America Thomas Dortch, and several other SCLC members all spoke out against the presence of the National Guard. Certainly a show of force and intimidation by the hands of Atlanta’s governmental elite, the mere mention of the National Guard, along with a refusal by the city to cooperate with any of the planning committees all compounded to make huge groups of the black community skeptical of Mayor Campbell. This skepticism helped contribute to a nascent sense of community akin to motivations that helped organize the mid-century civil rights revolution.

The seeds of local organization were planted as large groups of black organizations such as the SCLC and the NAACP spoke out against the actions of Mayor Campbell. Sociologist Aldon Morris addresses the significance and mechanics of the organizations that sprang up to address civil rights issues. In *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Morris explains how “local movement centers” were established in towns like Montgomery, Tallahassee, and Birmingham during the late 1950’s, which laid the groundwork for the civil rights movement to come to fruition. Defining these centers as “a social organization within the community of a subordinate group, which mobilizes, organizes, and coordinates collective action aimed at attaining the common ends of that subordinate group,” supporters of Freaknik came to exemplify these movement centers.<sup>94</sup> Utilizing his past as an advocate of non-violent protest, Williams laid the groundwork for a “local

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<sup>94</sup> Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 66.

movement center” as he challenged Campbell and sought to organize large groups of students and residents with little regard to their protest experience. Aimed both at shaming Atlanta and providing a safe environment for the youth, adults and students came together in order to plan for Freaknik and provide visitors with a safe outlet for their youthful energies.

Less than a month before Freaknik, students and community leaders took the reins and formed a student-led committee for planning events in Freaknik 1995. Students and supporters of Freaknik called upon the grassroots tradition of the civil rights movement and formed their own organizations, such as Freedom Fest, to keep their fellow students and partiers safe. Mirroring civil rights activism, for the first time the African American church became a player by expressing its concern with Atlanta’s poor planning of Freaknik ‘95. The Concerned Black Clergy was urging churches to open their doors and allow Freaknik participants to sleep in the churches.<sup>95</sup>

The organizational actions taken by these Freaknik activists and Councilwoman Banks are best understood as a form of direct public action activism. Without a need for “prior experience and without regard to specific background, talent, or education,” these activists and visitors were able to aggravate Atlanta’s local government, which largely refused to cooperate with organizers.<sup>96</sup> These

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<sup>95</sup> Kathy Scruggs and Charmagne Helton, “Freaknik 95: Preparing to host a moving multitude; Churches asked to let revelers take refuge,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 4, 1995.

<sup>96</sup> Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (Soft Skull Press: Brooklyn, 2004),105.

An interesting note is Bynoe’s discussion of diplomacy and its relation to direction public action activism. She explains that for the negotiation to be successful, it is critical for “both parties actually

grassroots organizational efforts, which mimicked many aspects of the traditional movement, came to define Freaknik '95 as a continuation of Atlanta's radical past.

This said, the continuity was questioned at the time of Freaknik itself. On April 17, 1995, four days before Freaknikers descended upon Atlanta, *AJC* editorial writer John Head dealt with the "supposed" connections between the civil rights legacy and Freaknik. This editorial illustrates many of the simplifications assumed by the media about Freaknik and HBCU students. Claiming that students attending Freaknik "may know enough about the movement's history to buy into the idea that Freaknik is about fighting for racial equality"

Head completely missed the fact that these students came from HBCUs.<sup>97</sup> Their education, their association with Atlanta, and their racial solidarity all contributed to a sense of being connected to the movement. Whether or not these students were seen by the media as authentic members of a long Civil Rights movement is beside the point, the students viewed their actions as significant in challenging the racial dynamics of a city with such a rich history of racial tolerance. Head's essay is not arguing that all students attending Freaknik saw themselves as modern day activists, but by challenging the city in '94, shutting down major business enterprises, and invoking the movement, Freaknik '95 came to represent a challenge to the status quo. African American youth inhabited the white spaces of

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wanting to research a compromise" (102). The actions of Mayor Campbell and city officials largely seem to counter this notion as time and time again they refused to compromise or plan with organizers, only cooperating with activists at the last moment before the party.

<sup>97</sup> John Head, "High Anxiety: With Atlantans already in a panic and the students maybe coming with a civil rights chip on their shoulders, Freaknik is potentially explosive situation. Is there any way to keep things cool?," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 17, 1995.

Atlanta in the face of police opposition the same way the sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement did.

Understanding Freaknik participants as fighting against a perceived injustice is at the heart of understanding them as part of a civil rights movement. Head continues his ill-informed diatribe by discussing the fact that there was no White Citizens Council in Atlanta and “the closest thing to a high-profile all-white group in Atlanta these days is the professional hockey team.”<sup>98</sup> After decades of uneven economic distribution, the housing patterns of Atlanta had fallen into de facto segregation, and Freaknik represented a direct challenge to the predominantly white areas of the city. Head, like many of his counterparts, looked back at the civil rights movement with such a narrow frame that he was unable to understand Freaknik within the same tradition. The actions taken by the city and the residents to refute students’ claims about fighting for their civil rights lacked any knowledge of racial dynamics and operated under a utopian assumption of racial harmony.

In contrast, many primarily African American organizations demonstrated a more pragmatic vision of Atlanta’s racial dynamics. Many including AUC presidents, organizers, and the Black church believed that Atlanta owed its African American population the chance to host the party. C.T. Martin, a City Council member, had said that he understood Campbell’s predicament, “but this is the home of Martin Luther King and six black institutions of higher learning, and we owe it to the parents of these young people to cradle their children while they are here.”<sup>99</sup> Transcending the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ronald Smothers, “A fretful Atlanta awaits a deluge,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1995.

racial and political overtures of the debate, Martin struck a humanistic note by calling on officials and residents to care for the youth. As Freaknik '95 approached, community leaders and event supporters spoke of protecting visitors and students from violence as the protest of Campbell's actions took the form of community organization seeking to protect the youth. These groups' plans were carried out when students started arriving in Atlanta on Thursday, April 20, 1995.

Wearing t-shirts saying "After 400 years, It Ain't Nothing You Can Tell me" and "Chill...Bill", students who arrived in Atlanta faced a much different welcome than they had received in the past.<sup>100</sup> Students from around the country came to Atlanta and felt persecuted by police officers and singled out. The ACLU of Georgia announced that it would monitor the event and encouraged students to stay within the confines of the law, while also writing down all the details of any incident.<sup>101</sup> The city expected over 200,000 students, but only about half that number arrived.<sup>102</sup> On Friday night, when police tried to disperse a group of several hundred African Americans, they were hit with beer bottles and several businesses were burglarized. Marking a major shift, the students themselves seemed angrier about the police presence than in previous years. Melinda Carter, a Spelman senior, expressed her view of the racial dynamics of her city when she stated that "non-blacks are scared...based on the people I spoke to, they're really tense. I feel like

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<sup>100</sup> Gary Pomerantz, "Freaknik '95; Scenes; 'This is party and women,' said a visiting New Yorker as her surveyed; Underground. 'That's all it's about.' But for others, the celebration is about T-shirt sales- and the traffic jams that are sure to come," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 21, 1995.

<sup>101</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon and Gail Hagans, et al., "Freaknik '95; Short Takes; ACLU keeping watchful eye," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 21, 1995.

<sup>102</sup> A.J. Hostetler, "Freaknik Revelers disperse on rainy final day," *Associated Press*, April 23, 1995.

we're being caged in. They have gates set up everywhere.”<sup>103</sup> Student after student expressed the fact they felt caged in or like cattle and since cruising was discouraged, students walked around the city.<sup>104</sup> As rain further depressed the group of students, they began to congregate in the Atlanta Underground where violence was in the air.

The lack of organization, Mayor Campbell's attempt to discourage the event, and the huge police presence led to Freaknik '95 being marred by two instances of looting and hundreds of arrests. On Friday, April 22, thunderstorms forced many Freaknik visitors into the Underground Atlanta mall in the heart of downtown. All accounts claim everything was peaceful until around 11pm, when police tried to “disperse several hundred people...officers moved in after the crowd got rowdy.” During the melee that ensued, several stores were looted and police officers “were hit with bottles and other objects and CNN reported the crowd attacked a news crew.”<sup>105</sup> Just days before this debacle, over 50 people gathered near the CNN Center to protest in favor of two concerts that were to be held downtown on Friday and Saturday night, just blocks away from the Underground. Onyx Productions and Rappers Against Violence (RAV) held contracts with the Civic Center downtown Atlanta, which were revoked days before the party, leading Karen Amado of RAV to explain that students now had nowhere to go. With many major musical outlets and gatherings cancelled by Mayor Campbell, and rain forcing students into crowded

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<sup>103</sup> Calvin Baker, “Freaknik dodges Atlanta crackdown,” *Times-Picayune*, April 22, 1995.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> “Melee Mars Otherwise Calm Start to Freaknik,” *Associated Press*, April 22, 1995.

malls, students became infuriated by the actions of Atlanta's government and began to see themselves walking around in a police state.

The following day saw more instances of violence and looting in southwest Atlanta, focused around the Greenbriar Mall. Windows at Rich's Department store were smashed as Freaknik participants rushed in and out of the store carrying clothes and other goods. Lisa Mitchell of Tampa, Florida provides a prime example of how many of the visitors and African American community viewed the draconian handling of Freaknik '95. Mitchell said that "the city of Atlanta treated her and lots of visitors in town this weekend like second class citizens . . . This turned out to be an eye opening experience about the city that is supposed to be a Black Mecca." In response to the looting and destruction at Underground Atlanta and the Greenbriar Mall, Mayor Campbell said, "There was no excuse for this type of behavior. It wouldn't have mattered if there were concerts, or park events or anything else." While Campbell argued that there would have been violence even if the planned concerts and events had taken place, the indiscriminate enforcement of minor laws led to a very hostile environment with little to no places for visitors to go. The police state enacted by Mayor Campbell and enforced by Police Chief Harvard illustrate that city officials were unwilling to compromise with the organizers of the party who sought to lend structure to the event and offer destinations for visitors. With no planned events available for visitors, mob mentality led to the destruction of two shopping centers. Addressing the fact that the mayor flew in a helicopter to access the destruction at Greenbriar Mall, an Atlanta resident who wished to remain anonymous believed that this was a prime example of how the mayor was out of

touch with how to handle the party. The resident said that Mayor Campbell “doesn’t think things through and shoots straight from the hip. In fact, he’s liable to one day shoot himself in the foot.”<sup>106</sup> While Mayor Campbell certainly had every right to be upset about the weekend of looting, his refusal to work with sponsors to organize attractions for the visitors, coupled with the increased police presence, led to the hostile environment that bred these outbursts of criminal activity.

Two shootings, large-scale looting, and increased media attention on sexual harassment and violence towards young women tarnished Freaknik ‘95. Largely absent from previous years, the media’s focus on sexual violence can be seen as an example of the negative associations fundamentally linked to Freaknik ‘95 that would guide the actions of the city in the years to come. Marian Meyers, in her article, “African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race, and Class in the News,” examines sexual violence at Freaknik throughout the ‘90s until ‘95. Examining news reports and print media coverage of the event, Meyers attempts to show that most media outlets depicted female “victims as stereotypic Jezebels whose lewd behavior provoked assault.”<sup>107</sup> In the weeks after Freaknik ‘95, Meyers illuminates how “the spoken text blamed women for their own victimization, [while] the visual text at times contradicted this.”<sup>108</sup> Meyers work calls for further study and a comparison with media depiction of sexual violence during white college parties

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<sup>106</sup> Julius L. Evans, “Campbell assesses Loss, Damages At Rich’s Store,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 27, 1995.

<sup>107</sup> Marian Meyers, “African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race, and Class in the News,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* , Vol.21, No.2 (June 2004):95.

<sup>108</sup> Meyers, “African American Women and Violence,” 114.



the work also alludes to the racial undertones prevalent in the media's depiction of Freaknik. With a smaller crowd than in previous years and more police oversight, it seems unlikely that sexual crimes would become more prevalent during '95. But the conditions created by Campbell's traffic plan, in Thompson's view, created an atmosphere different from previous years. By pushing the students out from parks and onto the street, the sexuality exhibited by African American females served as a protest against the perception that Atlanta did not want black youth in their streets.<sup>109</sup>

As the police presence was debated in the days and weeks after Freaknik, most students expressed that they were not harassed directly by the police but felt upset that "they trap us on the expressway, knowing that our hotels are all downtown."<sup>110</sup> The increased police presence succeeded in dampening the party atmosphere, and fostered an environment of paranoia and distrust. Rev. L.F. Berry Jr. explained that he believed the "police was beyond the point of protection; it was a show of force."<sup>111</sup> According to Berry, the police in southwest Atlanta "reminded him of civil rights skirmishes in the 1960s... [and] sent the message to students...that concentrations of blacks are feared in Atlanta"<sup>112</sup>

When discussing large assemblies of oppressed peoples, Scott claims that in the eyes of the dominant, "there is every reason to believe that such gatherings are,

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<sup>109</sup> Thompson, "Performing Visibility,"35.

<sup>110</sup> Christi Conner and Bo Emerson, "Freaknik '95; Weary police bid Freaknik farewell," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 24, 1995.

<sup>111</sup> David Pendered and Scott Marshall, "Freaknik '95'; The black community; Police activity in southwest Atlanta: Was 'plan' too much or too little?," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 24, 1995.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

in fact, an incitement to boldness by subordinates.” Scott cites the visual impact of large crowds, the anonymity, and the fact that “if something is said or done that is the open expression of a shared hidden transcript, the collective exhilaration of finally declaring oneself in the face of power will compound the drama of the moment.”<sup>113</sup> The city that was “too busy to hate” was far from the racial utopia it depicted itself as and the police state present at Freaknik ‘95, along with the city’s confrontation with African American youth, undermined the public transcript portrayed by city officials.

Police Chief Harvard stated that during Freaknik ‘95, which drew about 100,000 people, equivalent to that of Freaknik ‘93, “324 adults and 223 juveniles were arrested.”<sup>114</sup> A far stretch from the bloodbath envisioned by Councilwoman Banks, the event came to signal the beginning of the end for Freaknik. A series of editorials the week after the event illustrate how residents viewed the 1995 party. M.B. Henderson praised Campbell and Police Chief Harvard stating that, “amid constant criticism, this is the first year the complaints of taxpaying citizens were addressed.”<sup>115</sup> Many residents like Henderson looked at Freaknik ‘95 as a turning point in the city’s struggle, the worst of the years were behind them as the party began to draw fewer and fewer attendees.

In the aftermath of Freaknik ‘95, activist James Coleman filed papers to recall Campbell from his post as mayor, claiming he “violated the human rights of college

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<sup>113</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 65-66.

<sup>114</sup> Paul Leavitt. “Looting, violence mar Freaknik fest,” *USA Today*, April 24, 1995.

<sup>115</sup> M.B. Henderson, “Fired up and Freaked out,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 27, 1995.

students who traveled to Atlanta in April for Freaknik by calling out an army of police to maintain order in the streets.”<sup>116</sup> While the case was rejected by Judge Ernest Woods on the grounds that Coleman’s accusations were based on “mere conclusions...[and] no particular facts,” the actions of Campbell continued to cause many leaders within the African American community much distress.<sup>117</sup>

Mayor Campbell’s refusal to work with Freaknik in ‘95 laid the groundwork for the city government’s handling of the event in the subsequent years. As the party pressed on, Campbell aligned himself with the economic elites of Atlanta who would contribute mightily to Freaknik’s slow decline.

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<sup>116</sup> “Coleman Seeks to Recall Campbell,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 30, 1995.

<sup>117</sup> “Judge Rejects Coleman Move to Recall the Mayor,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 6, 1995.

## Chapter 2

### The Slow Decline of the Fabled Party

After years of Atlanta's government trying to oppose the party, trying to work with the party, welcoming the party, and discouraging the party, Freaknik '96 came to mark the end of an era for a youthful generation in Atlanta. As Mayor Campbell came to distance himself from the event and the police repression became greater and greater, Freaknik participation began a steady decline. A watershed year that set the tone for upcoming years, '96 truly marked the yielding of Freaknik from black activists to the white economic elite as the actions of Mayor Campbell continued to deter visitors from coming to the party. With planned concerts being cancelled, various cities competing with Freaknik for visitors, economic leaders protecting the convention industry, and sexual abuse marring the public image of Freaknik, the party began a downward spiral that it would never recover.

Since Atlanta's business elite's support for positive relations between races was based on "Enlightened self-interest,' not altruism," it is unsurprising that the facilitating committee saw only that the money brought in over the weekend paled in comparison to the money it cost the city to run the event.<sup>118</sup> The facilitating committees' power was rooted in an alliance between municipal government and

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<sup>118</sup> Stone, *Regime Politics*, 208

business that had been maturing for decades. Discussing the three terms of mayoral rule under Maynard Jackson from 1974-1982, and from 1990-1994, Atlanta's first African American mayor, Stone notes that "without a closer partnership between city hall and the business elite, effective governance in Atlanta is difficult; impasse rather than action is likely." The relationship between these two groups is not as passive partners, but intertwined to the point that the business "elite is an active part of the governing coalition."<sup>119</sup> William Boone, a political science professor at Clark Atlanta, laid out the facts on how Freaknik was damaging to Campbell when he said that the event had all the issues, "the class question, the race question, a black mayor who in some people's minds represented the white business establishment against black students. How he handles that in the future will determine where his administration is going to end." As Campbell pushed further and further away from his roots as a civil rights activist and played into the hands of white Atlanta elites, he continued to take heat from the African American community.<sup>120</sup>

In May of 1995, the *AJC* ran a questionnaire concerning Freaknik in hopes of illustrating the racial divide it revealed within the city. Separating their results between white and black, the *AJC* reported that nearly 70% of African Americans believed Freaknik was a good thing for Atlanta while only 25% of whites thought supporting the party was a good idea. African Americans came to support the party in much larger numbers than their white counterparts, citing that it was good for business, projected a positive image, and attracted future residents. As Campbell

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<sup>119</sup> Stone, *Regime Politics*, 200, 234.

<sup>120</sup> Fears, "Campbell's nagging Freaknik problem."

attempted to distance himself, he also detached himself from the black political base of Atlanta. Many within the black community charged that Campbell was playing into the hands of the white economic elite, which as the event pressed forward, became more accurate.<sup>121</sup>

Two weeks after Freaknik '95, Colin Bessonette of the *AJC* interviewed Police Chief Harvard. In this interview, Harvard highlighted many of the issues considered during the planning of the following year's party. When asked if she believed Freaknik could be tamed, Harvard responded that it was "a political issue that's best left up to the mayor and the council . . . and if people are violating the law, then we will take the appropriate action. That's our job."<sup>122</sup> By immediately identifying Freaknik as an overtly political issue, Harvard distanced herself from the decision making process. As the actions of the police came under critique from lawyers, civil rights activists, and many within the African American community, Police Chief Harvard, much like Mayor Campbell, sought to distance herself from any responsibility in policy making during Freaknik. At the heart of many complaints towards Chief Harvard was the traffic plan laid out and enforced by the Police department. Despite several years' attempts, Harvard was never quite able to assuage the business class who felt they were losing business while still granting students the right to cruise.

The traffic plan implemented in '95 forced many visitors to circle around Atlanta for hours on end unable to exit the highway. Despite widespread criticism, a

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<sup>121</sup> Darryl Fears, "Opinions of annual festival are split along racial lines," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1995.

<sup>122</sup> Colin Bessonette, "Q & A On the News," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 6, 1995.

very similar traffic plan was implemented in '96 which "gave Olympic transportation planners confidence that Atlanta police can handle and herd the half-million people a day who will descend upon the city in the summer of '96." While the Olympic transportation committee was pleased with the traffic plan of '95, many residents complained that they could not get through the police barricades to their homes and workplaces. In one extreme instance, an officer detained Lesley McKeithan of Atlanta while she was on her way to Grady Memorial Hospital, which led to her miscarrying her 2½-month-old fetus. With traffic plans hurting both Freaknik and economically powerful members of the Atlanta community, the view on the future and potential cooperation with Freaknik continued to upset all facets of Atlanta's society.<sup>123</sup>

For Mayor Campbell, Freaknik was an issue that would not go away. Despite his belief that the city had "spent far too much time on an issue that has no real significance to the housing, to the welfare, to the children...to creating new jobs," the whole the city council would not drop the issue. In mid-May of 1995, the city council began adopting legislation to see if it could accommodate Freaknik and work with the event. During this time Mayor Campbell became disappointed with the event as it became an issue that defined several years of his career. Councilman C.T. Martin "explained to Bill [Campbell] that there are some people who will use this to run

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<sup>123</sup> Doug Monroe, "Monroe Drive; Freaknik traffic strategy wins favor for Olympics," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 7, 1995.

While Freaknik came to play a role in some aspects of Olympic planning, Atlanta had secured the bid in 1990, far before Freaknik ever came to be a pressing issue on the city.

against you,” since he had effectively alienated the black political base of Atlanta which had wholly supported him in his previous runs for office.<sup>124</sup>

As Freaknik '95 was examined and the planning of '96 was underway, Campbell stated, “Few, if any, events have been as controversial . . . or polarizing for our city.” Even as the city came to support the event and form committees to work with organizers, the racial undertones of the event largely kept Campbell from openly discussing it. The Mayor was thus isolated from his roots within the black community, and play into the regime politics of Atlanta. While in previous years Campbell had placed himself outside of black community, the debacle of the Comdex convention in 1995 influenced Campbell's decision making for the remaining years as the economic stability of large, predominately white corporations took top priority.<sup>125</sup>

Alienation from the black community was significant for Campbell. The mayor's failure to accommodate Freaknik flew in the face of what most African Americans saw as common sense. Harris-Lacewell lays out her view of black political thought based around the theory of “black common sense.” According to her,

Black common sense is the idea among African Americans that blackness is a meaningful political category...Political attitudes informed by black common sense are held by African Americans who consider the statement 'I am a black person' to have political, not just personal meaning.

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<sup>124</sup> Darryl Fears, “Campbell's nagging Freaknik problem; Mayor says he's 'tired of the issue'; Others aren't : Some black Atlantans remain upset over how the fest was handled,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 15, 1995.

<sup>125</sup> Joan Kirchner, “Atlanta Braces for Freaknik Party,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 16<sup>th</sup> 1996.



This definition of black political thought lends itself to Freaknik because of it does not rely on strict political attitudes. The act of large groups of African Americans coming together is in itself a political statement, albeit one with largely diverging meanings. While one needs to be careful to understand that black common sense does not lead to all African Americans coming to the same set of ideological conclusions, it does structure “African American political thought while still leaving space for variation in political approaches.” Thinking of this as a jumping off point for analysis instead of a strict codified rule helps to illustrate how Campbell’s distancing himself from Freaknik and the larger decision making process came to be a political issue. His identity as an African American in the city of Atlanta, along with his refusal to create a place for black youth to come together in a manner deemed fit by the youth itself, created political apathy towards the mayor from youthful voters who believed he was against them.<sup>126</sup> Campbell’s desire to move the party only bolstered Freaknik supporter’s belief that he had no intention of accommodating the party.

Started as a rumor after the flood of visitors in ‘94, the idea of moving Freaknik to a city more capable of handling the influx of visitors was always in the air of both participants and the city council. New Orleans, with its history of street festivals, seemed to be the most obvious city. Yet in May of 1995, the New Orleans City Council voted 5-2 against holding the party in ‘96. Councilman Oliver Thomas introduced the resolution and was supported by two of the four black council

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<sup>126</sup> Melissa Victoria Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 23-25

members, but ultimately the city council did not like the reports they had received from the Atlanta City Council about the event. Citing the fact that New Orleans's downtown was concentrated in a small space, Council President Peggy Wilson, one of two white council members, claimed that New Orleans was not the right city to host Freaknik. After this decision was made public, Troy Carter, a dissenting member, argued that the city was sending the wrong message to African American youth across the country. Carter argued, "We have the Mardi Gras, jazz festivals and Super Bowls. Super Bowl crowds get drunk and wreak havoc on the city, but we welcome them. We've done the same thing with other groups, except for these young blacks. These are our future leaders; lawyers, doctors, politicians." When attempting to move the party outside of Atlanta, Freaknik carried with it such heavy racial overtones that it continued to stall many from viewing its positive economic and social aims.<sup>127</sup> After his unsuccessful attempt to relocate the party, Mayor Campbell began to organize civil and community leaders to plan for the event as an attempt to appease both organizers and business leaders. By organizing two separate committees with different strategies for handling the event, Campbell sought to gain input from business leaders and leaders of the African American community.

In spite of this attempt at reconciliation, Campbell continued to catch criticism from many citizens across Atlanta. In late August of '95, Mayor Campbell appointed a Blue Ribbon Committee to examine the fete. Spelman President

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<sup>127</sup> Earnest Reese and Gerrie Ferris, "Around the South; Region in Brief; Big Easy snubs Freaknik," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 13, 1995. While Campbell was not solely responsible for the attempted movement of the party, he was in conversation with city council leaders in New Orleans and pushed for the party to travel across state lines.

Johnetta Cole chaired the committee, and other members included the president of Clark Atlanta, Dr. Thomas Cole, Kasim Reed, Dr. Robert Threatt, and Police Chief Harvard.<sup>128</sup> After months of meetings and deliberations, the committee came to the city in early December with the message that Atlanta should support the event and help organize it. The committee stated that the city knew the students would come and that their only option was to support and work with the party in order to avoid a chaotic ordeal. Laying out twenty-two recommendations for Mayor Campbell to consider concerning Freaknik '96, the Blue Ribbon Committee called for multiple promoters who would have full responsibility for their own funding, a comprehensive traffic plan, encouraged use of MARTA over the weekend, holding the party over two days (Friday and Saturday), and securing a concert facility capable of handling 30,000 visitors.<sup>129</sup> Along with these suggestions, the committee made a point to highlight the fact that the majority of criminal activity associated with '95 was not related to the college-aged participants of Freaknik, and thus not supporting the event based on perceived criminal activity was not congruent with factual evidence.

This Blue Ribbon Committee is in many ways strictly a conciliatory effort made by Campbell. By placing individuals with little significant political or economic power on the committee, Campbell gestured towards those in support of the event,

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<sup>128</sup> "Mayor Appoints Blue Ribbon Committee," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 5, 1995. A couple of months after Police Chief Harvard had told the *AJC* that she would only follow orders and would leave the decision making up to the politicians, she joined the Blue Ribbon Committee which directly countered many of the wishes of Mayor Campbell. More research needs to be done to illuminate how this position influenced Harvard's actions during the party itself.

<sup>129</sup> "Welcome and Support Freaknik, City Urged," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 12, 1995.

but two months before the party in '96 Campbell illustrated his true desires. In early March of '96, Campbell created another committee for planning Freaknik. This "facilitating committee" was created in hopes of lending structure to the weekend. While Rev. George Durley, president of the Concerned Black Clergy was named Chairman; this committee was largely made up of Atlanta's economic elite. President of the Atlanta Hotel Council, Dave Kenny, and Marsha Brinkley of the Midtown Alliance each held positions and had a huge influence in shaping Freaknik policy.<sup>130</sup> As Campbell distanced himself, and eventually flat out refused to discuss Freaknik with the media, his "facilitating committee" acted as a counter balance to the Blue Ribbon Committee, which sought to welcome Freaknik with open arms.

While it is hard to commend the mayor's decision to dodge discussion of Freaknik, he does deserve praise for creating the Blue Ribbon Committee and the facilitating committee, which despite its makeup of economic elites, accepted that students were coming and that they needed to develop plans for the party. For the first time ever, the beginning stages of Freaknik starting rolling at a relatively early time. In late March of '96, the city granted four permits to promoters to stage events over the weekend. The city allowed the use of four city parks, "Piedmont, Mozley, Grant and Perkerson – for the weekend of April 19-21 for festivals and music concerts."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> "Freaknik Committee is Created," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 12, 1996.

No members of either the Blue Ribbon Committee or the Facilitating committee shared appointment on either respective committee.

<sup>131</sup> "Atlanta grants permits to Freaknik promoters," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 22, 1996.

Located several blocks from the AUC, many residents of Mozley Park voiced their opposition to the planned events as soon as they were proposed. Michael Phelts, chair of the Neighborhood Planning Unit K (NPU) of Mozley Park, announced that members of his planning association “voted against the holding of April 20-21 Freaknik festivities” in their neighborhood. Phelts stated that his group voted against these activities based on traffic issues and the disarray created by students in previous years.<sup>132</sup> As the party closed in, the planned events, the suggestions of the Blue Ribbon Committee, and park permits were largely undermined as groups like the NPU countered many of the collaborative actions between the city and Freaknik organizers due to their previously negative interactions with the party. Refusing to give Freaknik organizers an opportunity to change the tone of the party, the business elite and some members of the white community opposed any collaboration between the party and the city because of the disruptive connotations Freaknik invoked, despite the positive aims of many organizers.

Kruse examines the change from community to individuality concerning specific neighborhoods that proves to be helpful in illuminating the actions of the NPU who sought to discourage the party. During his study of the west side neighborhood of Adamsville, Kruse mentions that “as long as individual homeowners felt their individuals needs—protecting property values and maintaining a stable home—could be met by working with their neighbors, they did so.” Although they could sometimes work together as a community, many white neighborhoods of Atlanta “made this discovery, they thought of themselves less and less as

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<sup>132</sup> “NPU group Votes Against Freaknik,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 28, 1996.

participants in a larger society, with the attendant rights and responsibilities...these working-class whites now started to think of themselves as individuals, set apart from and, indeed, set against the rest of Atlanta.” As the NPU of Mozley Park battled against the decisions of the city sanctioned committees, they continued to keep concrete plans from forming.<sup>133</sup>

Following in typical fashion, less than two weeks before the event, controversy kept planning in a constant state of flux. After promoters were issued permits in Grant Park, many residents went to court in order to prevent Freaknik from coming to their neighborhoods. When Steven Muhammad, an organizer, failed to raise the one million dollar insurance policy, he and his lawyer appealed to Atlanta’s Licensing and Review Board. Along with keeping Grant Park free of Freaknik crowds, residents who protested Muhammad’s appeal also sought to prevent Louis Farrakhan, controversial leader of the Nation of Islam from speaking in the park. Steven Muhammad, a member of the Nation of Islam, was planning on having Farrakhan speak to students during his planned tour of the United States in the wake of the Million Man March along with concerts and dance contests. Rev. Tim McDonald of the First Iconium Baptist Church hoped that the city would not cave into the pressures of Grant Park residents, stating that they “have negative images of our black youth because of stereotypes that have been promoted primarily through the media.” While it is uncertain the exact reasons that residents of Grant Park came to oppose organized events in their neighborhood, the fact that the Nation of Islam came to play a role in the planning of the events certainly influenced the opinions of

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<sup>133</sup> Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 80-81.

many residents.<sup>134</sup> The actions of groups like the NPU and the residents of Grant Park had a direct impact on Freaknik as the turn out of students decreased and visitors continued to feel unwelcome.

When the curtain finally rose on Freaknik '96, many students and visitors who thought the actions of the police and restrictive traffic plan had gone too far and ruined the event. With a low turn out of less than 100,000 visitors, the most cited complaint by both local and visiting Freaknik participants was that the traffic plan made it difficult to travel around the city.<sup>135</sup> Lakeisha Moore, a student from Dillard University who had traveled to Atlanta for the festival, said that she tried “unsuccessfully to go to several clubs, but could not because of the city’s traffic plan, which meant numerous street and highway exit blockages.” Along with visitors, many local residents expressed outrage at the traffic plan. Stephanie Watts, a student at Clark Atlanta said she couldn’t get back to her dorm room and “felt like a prisoner in my own community.”<sup>136</sup> Along with the troubles caused by the traffic plan, the police state in '96 continued on upward trajectory and left many visitors feeling the city did not want them.

These controls may have contributed to descriptions of Freaknik '96 as a lower key event from previous years. In spite of this the event was still marred by one violent shooting death. Five local residents were indicted with murder and

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<sup>134</sup> “Grant Park Residents Go to Court Against SpringSlam,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 14, 1996.

<sup>135</sup> Russ Bynum, “Fewer Partyers, More Police Add up to Quieter Freaknik,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 11, 1996.

<sup>136</sup> Erin Crandall, “Students Give Freaknik a Failing Grade; Fault City,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 23, 1996.

aggravated assault charges for the death of Demetrius White of Akron, Ohio. Framed as a robbery, this murder stood out as the only serious crime reported connected to the '96 festival.<sup>137</sup>

The relative lack of violent crime did not mean that police were not active, however. Rodney Jones, an 18-year-old freshman, described his encounter with the police in '96 that exemplified the experience of many. After walking out of a convenience store, Jones was handcuffed in the middle of the street for jaywalking. When asked what the ticket listed his offence as, he explained it said, "When directed to stay out of street, subject continued to disobey the request." Many believed that the string of arrests surrounding Freaknik '96 resulted from Police Chief Harvard leaving it up to the individual officers to decide how and when to make arrests. Without any formal system, many officers arrested students and visitors for minor offences, ones that would most likely be ignored on a normal weekend in Atlanta.<sup>138</sup> The heightened police presence coupled with the desire to appear ready to host the upcoming summer Olympics led to Freaknik '96 being viewed as even more severe than previous years. While in '95 Campbell expressed his desire to crack down on the party, '96 onward illustrate his use of the police to discourage visitors from coming all together.

Kalvin Jamal Williams of Missouri City, Texas, echoed Jones on Atlanta's mishandling of Freaknik '96. Williams said he felt anything but "welcomed" by the

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<sup>137</sup> "5 Indicted for Freaknik Visitor's Murder Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 7, 1996.

<sup>138</sup> Kathy Scruggs, "Freaknik '96; Arrests mount up as officers work to rein in revelry; Some criticize law enforcement tactics as harsh, particularly on juveniles," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 21, 1996.



mayor and local police and cited his two and a half years of army experience as a qualification that he understood the importance of crowd control. Williams claimed that the “excessive police harassment, prohibition of scheduled activities, and creation of unending traffic frustrations were completely unnecessary procedures” that led to many vowing never to come back to Atlanta. With the upcoming Olympics, Williams called on the world to focus on the crowd and traffic tactics during the summer games to see “whether these police procedures are necessary when an activity is truly ‘welcomed’.”<sup>139</sup>

Another case that merits attention with respect to crowd control is the Atlanta Police Department’s response to young attendees at the festival. Besides spring break partiers, Freaknik drew many local youths as participants. In response to their attendance, Police Chief Harvard organized several buses to take anyone who looked under the age of 17 to the city jail where their parents were called to pick them up. Harvard cited the fact that these youth were both in danger and posed a danger to the crowd because of their tendency to run through the crowd, “causing a stampede mentality.” Angela Primm-Bethea, president of the Metropolitan Georgia Chapter of the National Association of Black Social Workers, said she felt that many police officers overstepped their bounds and arrested young students when they should have just received a warning. According to Primm-Bethea, this often ruined the future of many students who left Freaknik with a

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<sup>139</sup> Calvin Jamal Williams, “Letters to the Editor: Unwanted in Atlanta,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 20, 1996.

criminal record.<sup>140</sup> In the police state of Freaknik '95 and '96, even those who were still in high school and just walking through the streets were arrested as Atlanta flexed its crowd control muscles in anticipation of the upcoming Olympic games.

An editorial by Antoinette Ross explores the relationship many saw between Freaknik and the upcoming Olympics. Lambasting the local media for making the event seem apocalyptic in the weeks leading up to Freaknik '96, Ross stated, "all the media hype turned out to be just that, hype." With a very low turn out in comparison to previous years, Ross, a black college student and former Freaknik participant asked how Atlanta could make such poor predictions about the attendance of Freaknik '96. Ross stated:

City officials, media representatives and others naively believed that students would financially support a city that had been blatantly disrespectful to them a year before and had threatened to dish out more of the same this year. Their arrogance and lack of ability to access the situation cost the city millions of dollars in unneeded police protection and revenue to hostels, restaurants, and other businesses.<sup>141</sup>

Ross argued that three malls closed down on Saturday to avoid the Freaknik crowds and asked if business owners and the police department would enforce similar laws during the Olympics. While Freaknik had no direct influence on the Olympic bid because Atlanta had already secured it in 1990, it did serve as a rhetorical example of Atlanta's ability to host large groups of people. Representing a

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<sup>140</sup> Kathy Scruggs, "Freaknik '96; Arrests mount up as officers work to rein in revelry; Some criticize law enforcement tactics as harsh, particularly on juveniles," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 21, 1996.

<sup>141</sup> Antoinette Ross, "If You Can't Direct Freaknik how Can you Direct Olympics," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 2, 1996.

group of visitors who were truly welcome, many Freaknik supporters argued that the party should be welcomed and planned for with the same zeal as the Olympics.

The theme of promoter unrest and the charges of discrimination were nothing new to Freaknik, but the battle between two concert promoters, Karen Amado of Rappers Against Violence and Joel Cogdell, that came to a head in July of 1996 stands as a prime example of independent promoters' view of the Atlanta's city council's handling of Freaknik. After over a year of fighting with the city of Atlanta over financial compensation for the cancelation of their planned concerts, the two took their cases to the court and filed lawsuits against the city. While the city had previously cited safety concerns in their policy of revoking previous agreements, both promoters believed the city's negation of open dialogue and the aura of negative perceptions surrounding Freaknik '95 led to the city cancelling the concerts. Citing that the cancellation of the concert led to her financial ruin, Amado stated "her three children have moved to Denver with their father because she couldn't afford to provide for them." The Atlanta City Council had previously sanctioned \$60,000 in settlement money to be split between Cogdell and Amado, but the two had refused the offer as the case took on a larger scope. While both parties sought nearly eight million dollars in damages, Amado claimed, "I want this to be a public issue. Look at how the city treats small business...I lost the money and I survived. Now it's about the principle." Focusing on City Attorney Clifford Hardwick in the lawsuit, the two promoters purported a "tangled web of actions by

the city, including 'racketeering'.<sup>142</sup> Directly taking on the regime politics present in Atlanta, Cogdell and Amado represent small business and Freaknik challenging Atlanta's supposedly progressive nature. Defying the regime politics of Atlanta, Amado and Cogdell sought to organize Freaknik and make money in the name of African American small business.

In October 1996, Toomer looked back at the state of the party she helped found. As a secretary of the D.C Metro club, she cited Freaknik '96 as "sporadic and unproductive, not even a spring break event. I didn't like seeing people get killed. I didn't like the chaos. I didn't like that people couldn't get to weddings because of cruising." As Toomer prepared to submit a planned proposal for the upcoming Freaknik, she sought a federal trademark for the Freaknik name. Previously unsought, this trademark "would give her sole rights to market the event to corporate sponsors such as Coca-Cola, NationsBank and Nike," which would have almost certainly hedge any financial losses in the planning of the event. Claiming that she was committing her "professional life to this," Toomer became the frontrunner in the group of activists and concert promoters who sought to gain the permission of the city to plan events for Freaknik '97.<sup>143</sup>

At the beginning of 1997, Mayor Campbell announced the formation of a 16-person committee to plan for the upcoming spring break festival. Purposely avoiding the name Freaknik in his discussion, during an election year, Campbell was

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<sup>142</sup> Charmagne Helton, "Freaknik 1995 failed concerts spark lawsuits; Promoters take the city to court saying canceled events cost them thousands of dollars," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, July 26, 1996.

<sup>143</sup> Darryl Fears, "A founder of Freaknik looks ahead; Sharon Toomer has plans to market, structure event," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 19, 1996.

forced to acknowledge and plan for the party that, in many ways, had come to define his political career. Citing the fact that the city of Atlanta had become “accustomed to handling large crowds after hosting the Olympics,” Mayor Campbell consequently started their planning earlier in the year and, echoing earlier failed sentiments, claimed they would include more “student representation in the decision-making, and [would] devise a more effective way to manage traffic and crowds.” While this plan early plan often mentality espoused by Campbell in early ‘97 was nothing new, the notion that Atlanta had learned to how to better accommodate large groups of people after the ‘96 Olympics was new.<sup>144</sup> During the games, over 2 million people came to Atlanta and despite criticism involving ghetto clearing and racial profiling involved in the destruction and building of Olympic sites, the city was largely applauded for its management of the event. Now, with the Olympics successfully carried off, Atlanta seemed ready to truly host Freaknik, rather than merely contain it, and yet, despite the efforts of organizers, Atlanta continued to discourage the event

In the aftermath of Freaknik ‘96, Sharon Toomer, one of the original founders of Freaknik, said she had enough of what the event had become. With the upcoming 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Freaknik in ‘97, Toomer sought to retake control of the event. Referring to Freaknik ‘96, Toomer claimed it “had become sporadic and unproductive, not even a spring break event. I didn’t like seeing people get killed.”

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<sup>144</sup> Alfred Charles, “Atlanta already is making plans for Freaknik’97: Committee named to design activities for visiting black college students,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, January 1, 1997.

Hoping for a weekend cruising zone and 24-hour party venue, Toomer pitched her proposal to the city council without ever receiving a definitive answer.<sup>145</sup>

A key difference between Toomer's proposal and previous attempts at taming the party was her utilization of the Internet and student representatives. While in the past organizers laid out traffic plans and sought to structure the event, they never had a good way to disseminate the information. Toomer's proposal called for a toll free number, a web site, and Freaknik representatives at a network of college campuses around the country to distribute flyers and Freaknik do's and don'ts.<sup>146</sup> Even though one of its original founders came out to save the event from itself, Toomer's proposal was denied by the city council, although many of her ideas were implemented by the city.

As technology continued to evolve and the Internet came to prominence, Mayor Campbell and the committee launched a website dedicated to the planning and dissemination of information about Freaknik. By April 1<sup>st</sup> of 1997, the site had over 13 million visits and the "consortium of Butler, Porter, Greene and Shaw- all consultants to larger companies hoping to venture into cyberspace-built the Freaknik Web site to prove that African Americans' interest in the internet is huge." With information on events, the site contained interviews with several activists, athletes, and celebrities. With Atlanta Falcons wide receiver Andre Rison, Comedian Tommy Davidson, New York Giants running back Rodney Hampton, and Michael Bivins, a member of the New Edition singing group contributing welcome videos to

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<sup>145</sup> Darryl Fears, "A founder of Freaknik looks ahead; Sharon Toomer has plans to market, structure event," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 19, 1996.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

the site, Freaknik '97 attracted the attention of large swatches of people. In addition to celebrities and athletes, Dexter King, son of Martin Luther King Jr., sent out a brief message to those interested in attending Freaknik: "I'm sending out a message to all of you coming down for Freaknik . . . Have a good time in our city. Always remember to be safe. And stay positive."<sup>147</sup>

In contrast to the freedom of the Internet and the abundance of celebrities supporting Freaknik, speech at the event remained politically repressed. Adding to the political tones of Freaknik, Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, planned to make an appearance in Grant Park during the '96 party which would continue to influence the decision making of the city council for years to come. While he was eventually not allowed to speak at Grant Park due to controversy and the city council pulling previously planned permits, Farrakhan did still manage to speak to thousands at First Iconium Baptist Church the Thursday before Freaknik. Farrakhan urged students to "be more sober than you have ever been...I would advise you not to be a wild and savage group, as you have been in the past, because you are only giving an enemy an excuse to do to you what they have been doing all over the world." A highly controversial figure, Farrakhan touched on many of the issues brought up by the SCLC, SNCC, NAACP, and more conventional black community groups concerning Freaknik. Namely that students needed to behave well during the party because many segments of Atlanta were looking to cancel the

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<sup>147</sup>Darryl Fears, "Freaknik-Friendly on Net; City starts web site for April's influx of students," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, January 20, 1997.

Darryl Fears, "Freaknik on the web: 13 million visits and counting," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 1, 1997.

event under the guise that black youth were acting irresponsibly in the streets. The perception that the city seemingly welcomed the students, but really just wanted the party to end or to arrest youth was an ever-present concern that both radical and conventional African American groups dealt with over Freaknik '95 and '96. Farrakhan's discussion of the matter added a deeper level of anxiety to those opposed to the party because of his radical rhetoric and reputation.<sup>148</sup>

Perhaps in order to assuage fears, Freaknik organizers preparing for preparing for around 100,000 visitors in late February of '97, began to release some of their information. Even in its planning stage, however, Freaknik '97 was fraught with tension. Encouraging promoters to keep events placed "along one corridor, the stretch of Martin Luther King Drive that runs through the Atlanta University Center," the committee chaired by Morris Brown president, Dr. Jolly, who hinted early on that they would be seeking a more confined space than in previous years. After hearing a dozen proposals from potential organizers, the big talk of the day came from the exchange between Steven Muhammad and board member George Hawthorne. Muhammad and his attorney H. Michael Harvey got into a "tense exchange with board members over Muhammad's seemingly simple plan to arrange a speech featuring the Rev. Ben Chavis, the ousted NACCP president, at the First Iconium Baptist Church, followed by a picnic." In response to this proposal, board member Hawthorne said, "Steven [Muhammad], let me be straight with you . . . Is the minister coming?" Barking back at Hawthorne, Muhammad asked, "Did I say he

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<sup>148</sup> Della D Pulliam-Hill, "Farrakhan Gives Students Advice for Freaknik Activity," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 21, 1996.



was coming? . . . Why did you ask me that? Did I mention Mr. Farrakhan?” As the city began to cooperate more with Freaknik promoters, the event itself became a heavily filtered, and in many ways, politically censored event.<sup>149</sup> While Campbell continued with his “all are welcome” rhetoric and heavy police presence, in actuality he sought to stifle the event.

Censored or not, by late February, Atlanta finalized its decision on which proposals they would accept for the upcoming year. The words of Michael Frazier illustrate Mayor Campbell’s planning committee’s attempt to censor the promoters and shape the event. Frazier had proposed a concert featuring Atlanta rapper Freak Nasty, which led to “Atlanta officials . . . drafting a letter to Frazier to say his event doesn’t fit the committee’s perception of a wholesome spring break event for 100,000 black college students.” This censorship highlights the divide between the hip hop generation and the city of Atlanta as the two fought over what was deemed acceptable and welcome within the city. As this generation began to align itself with the more traditional members and groups of the civil rights movement, the city still had a negative association between hip hop music and the party. Many on the committee “said they thought such music lured partygoers who were prone to violence.” While Freak Nasty is not exactly highly political, the fact that the city refused to work with both Frazier and Amado of Rappers Against Violence shows the reluctance of the city to work with many within the hip hop community, despite the mid to late 90’s representing the first time Atlanta truly began to shine on the

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<sup>149</sup> Darryl Fears, “Black Spring Break; Freaknik Organizers running into some roadblocks; Reshaping event: City officials are making plans to ensure that there is no repeat of the citywide gridlock of 1994,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, February 23, 1997.

hip hop map. This censorship became the norm for Freaknik in the post '95 world as the desires of visitors, promoters, and students continued to be repressed by those who believed the party to be nothing more than a nuisance.<sup>150</sup>

George Hawthorne, "executive director of a property management company," explained that the "event needs some focus and leadership to emerge . . . It was an evolving mass of people with no direction." Even as Frazier and Amado attempted to organize and become leaders within the event, the city council and Hawthorne only accepted recommendations they believed would fit in with their censored desires. In comparison to previous years, Atlanta actually turned down promoters and only "recommended 11 promoters of concerts and three-on-three basketball events for permits." For those fortunate enough to receive a city recommendation, they received "a city-issued permit for promoters . . . free publicity for events," and allowed the city to get a stronger feel for the traffic congestion and how to deal with it.<sup>151</sup>

One positive change the city of Atlanta made to Freaknik '97 was to do away with their highly criticized policy of checking IDs of residents and visitors seeking to drive to work, to concerts, or just to their homes. Police Chief Harvard said that "officers at roadblocks that are thrown up will be encouraged to give the benefit of the doubt to workers and residents who want to pass through, to reach homes and offices." With minimal street closures, the major differences in the traffic plans of

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<sup>150</sup> Darryl Fears, "City puts stamp on Freaknik plans; Atlanta panel tries to exert artistic control," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, February 27, 1997.

<sup>151</sup> Darryl Fears, "City puts stamp on Freaknik plans; Atlanta panel tries to exert artistic control," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, February 27, 1997

previous years were the fact that interstate ramps would not be blocked and that passes would not have to be distributed and shown to officers at police stops.<sup>152</sup>

While these traditionally contentious issues promised to pass quietly, one of the biggest problems facing Freaknik '97 was one that no one involved in the planning of the event had seen coming: a bomb threat. In mid-March of '97, federal agents announced that they believed Freaknik could be a possible target of a terrorist attack. While it is unclear exactly who could be behind such an attack, the militant Army of God had claimed responsibility for the recent Atlanta bombings of an abortion clinic and gay nightclub.<sup>153</sup> As Campbell struggled to “put two explosive words into one sentence Thursday-“Freaknik” and Bomb”,” the date of the party became a prime concern. Since Koresh’s death, April 19 has been marked as a day of militant terrorist unrest. Two years after the death of Koresh, the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed nearly to the ground. Jay Spadafore, FBI spokesman, said that the “FBI has been working for weeks with the state and local law enforcement leaders in devising responses to large events which will occur in Atlanta . . . We will be involved with the city’s plan for the weekend.”<sup>154</sup>

Now with federal law enforcement in tow, organizers for Freaknik '97 continued to face objections from not only observers, but participants as well. Days

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<sup>152</sup> Maria Elena Fernandez, “Freaknik traffic gurus aim to keep it rolling; Interstates will be open, passes a thing of the past,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 10, 1997.

<sup>153</sup> David Morgan, “threat seen to Atlanta Gathering,” *Star-Ledger*, March 14, 1997.

<sup>154</sup> Darryl Fears, “Campbell seeks volunteers for Freaknik security; Call for aid comes amid bomb fears,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 21, 1997.

David Jackson, “Recent bombings may be retaliation for Waco siege, officials reveal,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 4, 1997.

before the event was to begin, Jeff Dickerson published an editorial in the *AJC* that elegantly framed all of the racial and political baggage surrounding the party.

Claiming that visitors were not

coming to drink from the fount of civil rights, to rub shoulders with the [Joseph] Lowerys and [Andrew] Youngs and Hoseas [Hosea Williams]—The people who gave them their freedom to act a fool—they come instead just to act a fool. . . . These collegians come not in dignity and racial pride to a town soaked in civil rights history, but to revel in hip hop culture that glorifies violence, thuggishness, the lowest common ghetto denominator and a grotesque disrespect for women.

While Dickerson's diatribe falls into the common association between hip hop and violence that marked the planning of '97, his discussion of the party's role in the upcoming mayoral election deserves praise. Arguing that both incumbent Mayor Campbell and his challenger City Council President Marvin Arrington stand behind Freaknik, not because "moderate black politicians love street bedlam...but because Freaknik has become a racial litmus test in Atlanta's black communities," Dickerson illustrated that even as Campbell sought to discourage and avoid the event, it still played a role in his reelection. Dickerson went on to state that, "You cannot be black and against it, and get elected. Opposing Freaknik is considered 'selling out.'"<sup>155</sup>

Days before the event, the black press from around the country touched on the party and its changing nature within the African American community. From across the county, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* published an article asking the question that many within the black community were wondering, "Freaknik '97: Street Party

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<sup>155</sup> Jeff Dickerson, "Event is running its course; Is Freaknik a hiphop, or college, happening?," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 15, 1997.

or Controlled Fun?” Discussing the event with two students from nearby Alabama State University in Montgomery, Lidia Lanns claimed that the “essence of Freaknik is not organized. It’s about hanging on the street and having a good time.” Lanns went on to discuss Freaknik as similar to an African American Woodstock music festival in the sense that even with concerts and organized events, participants would largely do what they pleased, although she did make a point to say that Freaknik was all about “having a good time and not hurtin’ anybody.”<sup>156</sup>

As Freaknik ‘97 came and went, the general view from the visitors was that the event was lackluster in comparison with the famed hijinks of the 1993-1995 period. Police Chief Harvard was quoted as saying, “I feel the entire weekend went generally well, we had less problems than in the past and were relatively free of incidents.” With 1,227 charges filed by the police during ‘97, in comparison to the over 2000 during ‘96, Police Chief Harvard certainly had much to be proud of, though students still chafed under her restrictions. Harvard claims that lewd behavior, such as public intoxication, nudity, and mild drug use was largely a “societal problem...[and] their parents would be shocked at their behavior. Area parents, aunts and uncles need to help us.”<sup>157</sup> Harvard also argued that the relationship between partiers and the police had been made less adversarial thanks to their role in protecting students from a potential bombing. The Chief remarked,

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<sup>156</sup> “Freaknik ‘97 Street Party or Controlled Fun,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 17, 1997.

<sup>157</sup> Catrina D Harvey, “Problems with Freaknik ‘97 less this year,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 24, 1997

“students this year [1997] felt we were not only there to keep them orderly, but to protect them from what could have been a potential bomb attack.”<sup>158</sup>

The relative calm of '97 did not mean that the event was free of incidents, however. Highlighting the police fear of new technology in the post-Rodney King World, Freaknik '97 became rattled by what became known as the “Sinclair Incident.” During the Freaknik weekend, on April 20, Timmie Sinclair, a 27 year-old African American resident of Atlanta, was charged with aggravated assault and obstructing an officer. Sinclair, who was traveling with his wife and young child, claimed he was instructed by police to drive through a nearby roadblock because he needed to stop at the local Kroger to purchase medicine for his sick child. After driving through the roadblock, officers chased him into the Kroger parking lot located on Cleveland Avenue. An unidentified man who brought his camera for the purpose of videotaping Freaknik captured the melee that ensued once the police caught up with Sinclair in the parking lot. The video showed several “officers beating him with nightsticks, dousing him with pepper spray and shouting obscenities” at Sinclair. SCLC national president Joseph E. Lowery, who also served with the organization of Freedom Fest in 1994, claimed that his organization “will watch very closely and trust that justice will be served as the legal process begins to run its course.” Along with attracting the concern of the local media, NAACP, and the SCLC, the “Sinclair Incident” became an issue of interest for the FBI, who began “probing whether or not the Atlanta police officers violated Sinclair’s civil rights

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<sup>158</sup> Catrina D Harvey, “Problems with Freaknik '97 less this year,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 24, 1997.

when he was beaten with night sticks and doused with pepper spray during his arrest.”<sup>159</sup>

Less than 10 days after the story broke of Timmie Sinclair’s beating, Police Chief Harvard released a public statement saying that “‘unauthorized force’ was used in the arrest and beating of Timmie Sinclair during the Freaknik weekend.” Of the five officers involved in the beating, the official inquiry found only one officer, Sgt. William Myers, 44 years old, and a 23-year veteran, to have violated any of the department policies. According to Harvard, Myers specifically violated department policy by striking Sinclair as he was falling backward, and by raising his baton with two hands over his head to strike Sinclair. SCLC President Lowery described the matter as of “grave concern” and Sinclair’s attorneys described Harvard’s announcement as attempting “to justify the unlawful, savage beating” of a local citizen.<sup>160</sup> On May 22, 1997, nearly a month after the release of Sinclair, the Atlanta Branch of the NAACP held a public forum at the Mount Ephraim Baptist Church to discuss the implications of the beating on the African American community and to combat the perception of growing police brutality present in Atlanta. Albert Mitchell, attorney for Sinclair and two other men claiming to have been recently beaten by Atlanta Police, chastised the verdict of Chief Harvard claiming, “each of those officers had an obligation to stop the other officer who was out of control. But they didn’t.” While Chief Harvard was not present at the meeting, several major

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<sup>159</sup> “Nation Watches Probe of Freaknik Beating; FBI Enters The Investigation,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1997.

<sup>160</sup> “‘Unauthorized Force’ Used in Freaknik Era Beating, Chief Says,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 15, 1997.

players within the Atlanta community echoed Mitchell's sentiments. Georgia State Rep. Billy McKinney argued that this event called for "a resurgence of the civil rights movement in Atlanta," and despite the large swatch of groups critiquing the actions of Chief Harvard, Rep. McKinney's request to Governor Zell Miller for an independent investigation into the beating was denied.<sup>161</sup> The fall-out from this incident serves to illustrate the importance of changing societal norms regarding race, civil discourse, and authority of the state in the late 1990s. Furthermore, it helps establish Freaknik's importance as a forum for discussion of these issues in context with America's understanding of racial equality and civil rights.

These issues are similarly addressed by Bell hooks In her 1992 work, *Black Looks*. In this work Hooks attempts to offer new ways of looking at issues of blackness, and in turn whiteness. Examining what she calls the oppositional gaze, which is framed around the notion that the "politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that slaves were denied their right to gaze . . . all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an opposition gaze."<sup>162</sup> This gaze came to be utilized by Freaknik visitors and groups such as the ACLU and NAACP throughout Freaknik, but it became a strong oppositional force to chief Harvard in the post '96 world. In an era dominated by the brutal beating of Rodney King, many within the

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<sup>161</sup> "Police Brutality Discussed," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 22, 1997.

<sup>162</sup> Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-116.



African American community came to look at the police with a heightened sense of distrust.

Combining this rebellious gaze with the proliferation of camcorders during the '90s led to a heightened sense of police surveillance. This gaze sought not only to protect the visitors and protesters from the domination of the police force not strictly along racial lines, but along lines of direct structural power. These Freaknik visitors who were armed with camcorders, along with reporters with cellular phones dialed into their respective newspapers created an inversion of the traditional monitoring of police on black youth. This gaze and inversion of power illustrated that “in resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist.” By providing oversight of Chief Harvard’s police force, Freaknik participants were able to resist the efforts of mayor Campbell to dispel visitors by keeping the actions of the police in check, and in one instance, publicizing it in order to draw attention to the discrepancies faced by visiting black youth.<sup>163</sup>

As the Sinclair case continued to play out, the SCLC, NAACP, and the Concerned Black Clergy all monitored the actions of both the Atlanta police department and Mayor Campbell closely. According to many within these groups, the 30-day suspension without pay doled out to Sgt. Meyers by Chief Harvard was lacking in severity and overlooked the much larger issue of police brutality in

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<sup>163</sup> Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-116.

Atlanta.<sup>164</sup> In conjunction with the increased presence of camcorders adding a level of “policing the police,” Joey Ivansco of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* provides a glimpse into how the news staff covered the chaotic weekends. Stating that the paper was “on overdrive covering the April street party,” Ivansco explained that “photographers generally work in pairs, using pagers, cellular phones and two-way radios to communicate with the office” during their ventures into the crowd. This direct connection between photographers and reporters with the *AJC* office added to the increased awareness of police brutality and misconduct throughout Freaknik while illustrating the increased usage of technology in the monitoring and reporting of actions both by visitors and the police force.<sup>165</sup>

In the years after 1997, the event continued to dwindle in terms of attendance as Atlanta officials worked alongside the event in an effort to foster a greater sense of safety for both visitors and residents. In May of 1998, George Hawthorne, “a local events promoter and chair of the mayor’s 15 member” planning committee laid out a plan for visiting students. Framing the theme of Freaknik ‘98 around “It’s All About Respect,” Hawthorne recommended job fairs, using Centennial Olympic Park as an open meeting area for groups of HBCU students. Explicitly stating that he sought to draw students out of their cars and into specific monitored locations, [subject of the main clause needs to be the same introduced in

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<sup>164</sup> Catrina D Harvey, “SCLC Responds to Police Officer’s Suspension,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 6, 1997.

<sup>165</sup> Joey Ivansco, “Covering Freaknik,” *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, December 31, 1996.

opening clause] those tasked with organizing Freaknik since the '95 period had attempted to deter this aspect of Freaknik.<sup>166</sup>

As Freaknik began inching towards the new millennium, the crowds continued thinning out and the event to played less and less of a central role in the political climate of Atlanta. Falling into a cycle of planning, debate, and declining turnouts the importance and discussion of the event in local media continued to wane. In the years between '98 and 2000, the police state set up by Mayor Campbell seriously deterred students who viewed the actions of the city as unwelcoming.

Many saw the actions of the city's government, specifically their attempts to control and bottle traffic, as a tacit attempt to discourage Freaknik all together. Sharon Toomer, Freaknik founder, member of multiple Campbell-sponsored committees, and promoter, called the actions of the city illegal, stating, "In the public streets of this country, this state and this city, people have the freedom of movement. The plug can't legally be pulled on Freaknik. You can't build a wall or fence around this city to try to stop people from coming."<sup>167</sup> Despite the impassioned words of Toomer, the efforts of Mayor Campbell to discourage visitors from partaking in the Freaknik festival were largely successful.

Looking back on the legacy of Freaknik as it declined, Biffrey Braxton, an 18-year-old microbiology student from the University of Alabama, highlights the connection between the festival and historical carnivals within the African Diaspora. While Mayor Campbell discouraged the party through censorship and increased

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<sup>166</sup> "Alexis Scott Reeves, "Report: 'Freaknik' Can be About 'Respect,'" *Atlanta Daily World*, March 8, 1998.

<sup>167</sup> Sharon Toomer, "Letters From Our Readers," *Atlanta Journal Consitution*, May 10, 1997.

police presence, Braxton signifies the disconnect between visitors understanding of the party and the actions of Campbell. Challenging opponents of Freaknik, Braxton said they “fail to realize the purpose of this gathering. All our lives we strive to solve problems resolve issues and achieve goals. Freaknik is not about that. It was designed to meet people and party with them, and it does just that.” In a similar tradition of corn shucking rituals, John Canoe fetes, and Juneteenth celebrations, Freaknik represented a period of escape from the trials of school for students, and a chance for black youth to cut loose and be surrounded by their peers. Just as similar rituals and festivals have both directly and indirectly harassed the larger white society, Freaknik by its very nature was incendiary and represented a brief opportunity for inversion in a society that consistently worked against the black population.<sup>168</sup>

Unfortunately, these observations did not slow the event’s steady decline in size. Aside from earlier brief mentions of moving Freaknik to New Orleans, the planning stages of 1997 marked the first serious attempt to relocate the event to a city more tolerant of a spring break crowd. As early as May 1997, Glenville John, senior revenue manager for Air Jamaica airlines was publicizing the opportunity for students to come to Montego Bay. Targeting black students, Jamaica World Travel agency scheduled the “Hot! Hot! Hot! Freaknik Jam 1998,” over the same weekend in April as Freaknik. Offering round-trip airfare, hotels, and food for around 500 dollars a person, T.W. Williams, a Clark University graduate and Freaknik promoter since 1994, said that amount of money was well within the reach of most Freaknik

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<sup>168</sup> Biffrey Braxton, “Letters, Faxes, & Email,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 12, 1997.

visitors. Along with attracting students and black youth, Jamaica also attracted many promoters who felt slighted by the actions of Atlanta in previous years. Don Rivers, whose promotion company lost money at Freaknik in '97, was working with local Jamaican promoters instead of dealing with the city. Citing the fact that Atlanta had published his events in its brochures, the reality that streets were blocked off to visitors led Rivers to say, "it was like they sabotaged the entire event...Even though the city of Atlanta pretended [to welcome Freaknik] this year [1997], it is obvious that they don't want the event here."<sup>169</sup>

Along with Freaknik considering moving their business ventures away from Atlanta, corporations who held conventions during the '97 festival threatened the city with never returning. TruServ Corp, a hardware company who had booked a 15,000 person convention during the party, was outraged that none of their clients were able to get to the convention or their hotel rooms, costing the city nearly 18 million dollars in lost convention revenue. Mayor Campbell went as far as taking an unannounced trip to TruServ in Chicago, Illinois to apologize to chairman and chief executive of the company, Dan Cotter. After months of swearing never to return to Atlanta, this visit, which Cotter described as basically Campbell traveling to Chicago to say "I'm sorry' and to get us back," worked for the city as TruServ committed to come back in 1999.<sup>170</sup> This action showed that, when pressed, Campbell's interests and those of Atlanta's big businesses were basically the same. The mayor had little

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<sup>169</sup> Mara Rose Williams, "Freaknik May Travel to Jamaica," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 27, 1997.

<sup>170</sup> "Charmagne Helton, "Campbell in Chicago: Sorry About Freaknik," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, July 18, 1997.

interest in shoring up an event that was seen as a threat to stability by outsiders who had a proven track record of spending money in the city.

This dynamic is explored by Elizabeth Grant, in her article, “Race, Place, and Memory: African American Tourism in the Postindustrial City,” where she examines Freaknik and Greek Picnic to illustrate the connections between the historic past with the modern tourist present. Starting in 1974, Greek Picnic was a gathering of HBCU fraternities from around the country that met in Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. Referring to Freaknik and Hosea Williams’s ardent support for the event, Grant argues “Freaknik reaffirmed Atlanta’s importance as a black mecca, a cultural and historic homeland for young black men and women in colleges and universities in cities across the nation.” Highlighting the role of Atlanta’s past in the ethos of the party, Grant eloquently shows why, to those who came to support Freaknik, the civil rights legacy of Atlanta played such a critical role. Grant also cites Newman’s study of race in Atlanta to show that despite the large concentration of middle class African Americans in Atlanta along with a strong black political leadership, “the working-class and poor black neighborhoods continue to bear the weight of the city’s growth.” This is critical to understanding the regime politics of Atlanta. Despite the relatively large African American political power base, the desire of the city to expand was fueled by the business elite who sought to attract a predominately white clientele.<sup>171</sup> While Grant focuses on the impact of tourism on

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<sup>171</sup> Elizabeth Grant, “Race, Place, and Memory: African American Tourism in the Postindustrial City,” in *African American Urban History Since World War II*, ed. By Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe. W. Trotter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 404, 409-410

the city of Atlanta, and not the interactions between the city leaders, police, and visiting youth, her analysis is useful because of her conclusion that the economic leaders of the city curtailed Freaknik.

Bearing these factors in mind, On April 8, 1998, Atlanta's government released their plan and brochure for the upcoming Freaknik. George Hawthorne, chairman of the Campbell-sponsored planning committee, stated the city was expecting fewer than 50,000 visitors "because of similar gatherings planned in Daytona Beach and Galveston, Texas." The smaller numbers allowed for Hawthorne to use Centennial Olympic Park as the major gathering venue in an attempt to encourage students to get out of their cars and off the streets.<sup>172</sup>

Heading into '98 with a very similar traffic plan as the previous year, one that stressed fluidity instead of stifling traffic blocks, the city of Atlanta and Police Chief Harvey's police force were as prepared as they had ever been for the incoming students. With Sweet Auburn Springiest '98, an event usually confined to Auburn Avenue, spilling into Woodruff Park to hold a music festival with over 200 acts, Atlanta was confident that students would be easily managed throughout the weekend.<sup>173</sup>

Atlanta residents were nearly at a loss for words on April 17, 1998, the first night of Freaknik, when crowds failed to materialize. While Police Chief Harvard and

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For a brief discussion on Freaknik focusing on 1995, please see Harvey K. Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 238-243.

<sup>172</sup> S.A. Reid, "Atlanta Unveils Plan, Brochure For Freaknik," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 8, 1998.

<sup>173</sup> S.A. Reid, "Freaknik '98 Sweet Auburn Springfest Among Weekend's Highlights," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

many other officials refused an estimate of the '98 crowd, Larry Seabrook, director of operations for the State Department of Transportation said, "it was nowhere close to the 50,000 advance estimate."<sup>174</sup> The visitors who did come to the city were reported to be largely more manageable than previous years, with two rapes being the most serious crimes reported during the weekend. Cynthia Tucker, a writer for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* who once supported the cooperation between the city and the event, wrote a thought-provoking piece the week after the party examining the misogyny present at the party. Tucker stated that the "atmosphere is so threatening for young women that many have learned to avoid Freaknik. Having fled to police officers to get away from a gang of young men . . . Spelman students Heather Jackson and Monique Davis went elsewhere for this year's spring break." Taking to task the presidents of the AUC institutions, Tucker pleaded with them to encourage their students to denounce what Freaknik had become. Clark Atlanta senior Demetria Osborne claimed that the sexual harassment so prevalent at Freaknik has "scared the females away." The AUC center presidents, who had previously encouraged cooperation between Freaknik organizers and Mayor Campbell were chastised by Tucker as she asked why "they pretend that this blatant disrespect for women (and a few young women's disrespect for themselves) is acceptable?" As Freaknik participation began to wane from a combination of strict

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<sup>174</sup> Joey Ledrod, "Lane Ranger; Freaknik '98," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 20, 1998.



police oversight and rival events, the unfortunate sexual assaults came to dominate discussion of the event and contributed to its downfall.<sup>175</sup>

Continuing the theme of sexual harassment playing a larger and larger role in the downfall of the event, during 1998, Atlanta's welcoming committee came to Mayor Campbell with a much different tone than in previous years. The committee was "shocked by TV footage of gangs of men groping women during the festival last month...[and were] asking Mayor Bill Campbell to withdraw Atlanta's support" for the event. Pushing for the city to discard all Freaknik events aside from a job fair, the head of the committee George Hawthorne, who helped monitor the '97 event, saw a woman running from a group of 20 to 30 men with "her underwear around her knees and her dress . . . up over her head . . . if it had not been for me intervening she would have potentially been raped in broad daylight." Even students at the AUC agreed with Hawthorne's assessment. Devin White, a member of the welcoming committee and student body president at Clark Atlanta said the whole event was shedding "a negative connotation on black college students...if anything negative happens, it's going to be looked at as if it's black college students doing these things."<sup>176</sup> The sexual abuse prevalent at Freaknik '98 led to previous supporters, including many AUC students changing their position on the event and opposing what it had become. As Mayor Campbell stepped up his police supervision and cut back on planned events, lawlessness increased dramatically. This rise in deviant

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<sup>175</sup> Cynthia Tucker, "My Opinion; Freaknik: Kids Turn Criminal While Leaders Hope For the Best," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 22, 1998.

<sup>176</sup> Russ Bynum, "Atlanta Committee Opposes Freaknik," *Associated Press*, May 13, 1998.

behavior led not only to supporters questioning the role of Freaknik, but to visitors opting to avoid the party all together.

The outcome of Freaknik '98 was relatively clear to all those involved: Freaknik as a major challenging voice in the city of Atlanta was no more. Mayor Campbell's police state and his distancing himself from the party serve as strong signals that the economy, the rise in negative media attention, the increased police state, and the ossification between politics and the business leaders all contributed to the downfall of a fabled party.

Freaknik '98 unfortunately marked the event's fall as a forum for the discussion of race related issues in Atlanta and the United States. In the end, Mayor Campbell's heavy-handed management and lack of support coupled with the displeasure of local businessmen doomed the event to oblivion. While the event continued on for two more years, the turn out was so small that it largely fell out of discussion in Atlanta. As the new millennium approached, students and youth who previously elected Freaknik as their first choice for a spring break destination scattered around the American South East as different parties with less repressive environments were organized.

## Conclusion

Freaknik '99 and 2000 were marked by a low turn out because of competition for students' attention from rival cities and a general sense of disappointment and fear in the environment created by Mayor Campbell and Police Chief Harvard. Less than a month before the '99 party, the city had received no official requests for Freaknik-related events, and many local hotels had reported significant drops in hotel room reservations.<sup>177</sup> Along with a disinterest in the minds of visitors, many highly vocal supporters of Freaknik began to change their tune and condemn the city for letting the event continue.

Throughout the early '90s era of the party, Cynthia Tucker, a staff writer for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, was one of the most ardent supporters of the party, but by 1999 her writings came to exemplify many thoughts previously held by those who against Freaknik. Highlighting the violence in the event as a the critical issue, Tucker argued, "Freaknik is dangerous to those who participate in it. Every year there are hundreds of arrests for violent crimes...more common than fatalities are sexual assaults, everything from rape to molestation to stripping women of their clothes in the streets." Even George Hawthorne, chairman of Mayor Campbell's

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<sup>177</sup> Carlos Campos, "For Freaknik, The Thrill is Gone," *Atlanta Journal Constituion*, March 14, 1999.

committee of business and local leaders, claimed the event had grown into something ugly and should be discouraged.<sup>178</sup> Despite the calls from many within his own staff to cancel the event, Mayor Campbell continued to inform students that they were welcome and instead relied on his police force and word of mouth to end the party.

Along with the actions of the Atlanta police force deterring visitors, the Black College Reunion in Daytona Beach, Florida took over 100,000 of the students who conceivably could have gone to Freaknik in previous years. Many of those at the Black College Reunion said, “they thought Freaknik . . . was already dead.” Citing the major differences between the two events, Wallace Copeland, an Atlanta local, argued, “In Atlanta, they block all the exits off. The police will get you for playing music too loud, for cruising, for everything,” while at Daytona Beach the police would only intervene with visitors when it was a major issue.<sup>179</sup> As students had a larger option of spring break destinations to select, the party continued in its slow decline.

While never releasing a specific number of visitors, Freaknik ‘99 attracted significantly smaller numbers than the 50,000 who previously attended. Word that Mayor Campbell and Chief Harvard were “cracking down on the slightest infractions apparently rippled to surrounding cities, causing attendance to drop and trouble

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<sup>178</sup> Cynthia Tucker, “ My Opinion; Friend of Freaknik: Mayor Refuses to Condemn Destructive Event,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 31, 1999.

<sup>179</sup> Ernie Suggs, “Live from Daytona, it’s Black College Reunion,” *Atlanta Journal Constitutin*, April 17, 1999.

that was widespread in recent years to be limited.” Focusing on the issue of sexual assault, Chief Harvard praised the women who avoided Freaknik saying that “the word has gotten around that if you come to Atlanta’s college spring break celebration, you could have some trouble” if you are a female. Anticipating the future of Freaknik, Chief Harvard smiled and stated “I don’t anticipate the kids will come here . . . They’ll want to spent it somewhere where they can have some fun.”<sup>180</sup>

Harvard’s assessment of the future of Freaknik was correct, and Freaknik 2000 came to be the dying breath of the party. With most students in the Southeast opting to head to Daytona Beach, the general word on the street was that the party was over. In the post 2000 years, Freaknik attracted less than a few thousand visitors, so little that the city stopped holding organizational meetings and the party dropped out of the public dialogue. As the years went, on Freaknik came to be the standard comparison for Atlanta’s inability to deal with large events. During the 2003 NBA weekend that crippled Buckhead, Freaknik comparisons were plentiful.<sup>181</sup> It wasn’t until nearly 10 years later that Freaknik came back into the popular imagination through a very unlikely source.

Adult Swim, a subsidiary of Turner Entertainment, aired their special, “Freaknik: The Musical” on March 7, 2010, and introduced a new generation to the party. Adult Swim, one of the major media outlets located in Atlanta, was in a special position to utilize their locality to highlight the actions of the city. The special

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<sup>180</sup> Lyda Longa and Bill Torphy, “Word of Police Crackdown Cools off Freaknik; Women Scarce, Cops Vigilant,” *Atlanta Journal Constituion*, April 19, 1999.

<sup>181</sup> Collin Campbell, “Atlanta Must Learn to Control Its Streets,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, February 11, 2003.

featured T-Pain, a prominent Florida rap artist, who said he claimed he wanted to do the show because “there was so much negativity around the idea of Freaknik that we felt like we should push the envelope and make it even more negative.”

Featuring women in bikinis, drinking in the streets, terrified white residents, and traffic jams across the city, “Freaknik: The Musical” represented a chance for Adult Swim to poke fun at the legendary party which shocked the city. The creators claimed, “they expect it will provoke the ire of people who do not want to be reminded of the complicated history that provided its source material.” Opening with the ghost of Freaknik being resurrected to bring the party back to Atlanta, every time the history of the get together was discussed, the general tone espoused by “Freaknik: The Musical” was that white Atlanta was responsible for shutting it down. Far from an accurate assessment of the party, this television event served as an intelligent satire about Atlanta’s obsession with Freaknik from a source within the city itself and brought the discussion of the event back into the larger dialogue.

This thesis draws attention to a modern cultural event with deep historic roots by focusing on the protest, racial division, and economic complication the party represented to the city of Atlanta. Freaknik caused city council members to turn against each other, brought out traditional civil rights leaders in support of it, made national news, and forced Atlanta leaders and Mayor Campbell to deal with a party that had come to illuminate the largely racially demarcated economic, social, and political gaps prevalent in the city.

Basing this analysis on the inversion of Atlanta's dependence on driving, the history of residential and economic segregation, the challenge Freaknik posed to the regime politics of Atlanta, and the notion of Atlanta as a home place for African Americans, this essay highlights the major issues at play concerning Freaknik. As students arrived in the city, partying in the streets became a tradition that exasperated Atlanta's infrastructure and caused huge problems for residents and visitors alike. Despite several iterations of traffic plans, Mayor Campbell and the city could never reconcile residents complaints with Freaknik participants desire to cruise. More than just blocking the streets, black visitors and local residents who participated in the party often congregated in the areas surrounding Midtown and Piedmont Park. These traditionally white neighborhoods of Atlanta became a hotbed for protest as black youth rushed into their white enclaves. Despite the protest of some white neighborhoods, for Freaknik supporters Atlanta represented a black Mecca. This idea of Atlanta as a home place for African Americans throughout the country hinged on Atlanta's civil rights history and its large black population, and yet many of the economic players in Atlanta opposed the event. The presence of huge groups of black youth with disposable income created several debates over the course of Freaknik, but as the party came to upset the convention industry of Atlanta, it directly challenged the regime politics of Atlanta as business and political leaders worked together to end the party. As the party came to represent opposition to the economic elite of Atlanta, Mayor Campbell and his business partners discouraged the event through police repression, a solidification between politics and economic interests, and negative media attention, all of which

contributed to the end of this mythic party. Despite the strong support of the event in the early '95 period, as Freaknik progressed into the late 1990s it fell victim to its own protest tactics as the city, through Mayor Campbell, various committees, and police chief Harvard came to indiscriminately enforce laws aimed at pushing the visitors away from Atlanta.

While in the end those who fought for Freaknik such as Council Woman Banks, Sharon Toomer, and Hosea Williams ultimately lost to the city of Atlanta represented by Mayor Campbell, the Midtown Business alliance, and neighborhood groups such as NPU of Mozley Park, the discussion Freaknik forced Atlanta residents to have shed light on many previously brushed over issues in the city "too busy to hate." Directly challenging the regime politics consisting of a close relationship between city council and business elites, Freaknik did manage to highlight the plight of small business owners in their attempt to compete with the larger economic power houses of Atlanta in the form of Freaknik promoters facing off against the convention industry. Even though Freaknik and its supporters ultimately lost to its opponents, the spirit of challenging the dominant culture that Freaknik instilled spread to parties across the country.

Greek Picnic, Relay Days, Black Beach Week, and Black Bike Week are some of the celebrations that have been overlooked by scholars that highlight a continuation of historical protest rituals. These large congregations of black youth have consistently challenged white authority in unique ways, and yet very little scholarly literature exists that explores any of these events in the fields of sociology, history, urban studies, African American studies, or legal history. While this thesis



far from a truly interdisciplinary work, it does lay groundwork for future scholars to study Freaknik and similar events. Basing future studies in a matrix analyzing the relationships between large congregations of black youth and their interactions with the larger society of the cities they encounter is a critical component in analyzing the role of race in the modern world.

An in-depth examination of Freaknik is critical to obtaining an understanding of modern protest rituals in the post-civil rights world. As these events continue to cause ire for cities and residents, a study of the history of late 20<sup>th</sup> century African American protest becomes a pressing issue in order to understand how racial dynamics have changed and continued since the traditional civil rights movement. As events like the Sinclair incident, Freaknik's troubled relationship with the Comdex convention, and black businesses interaction with the larger tourism efforts of cities continue to cause political and social unrest throughout various spring break destinations, a study of these events stretching back to the antebellum helps one's understanding of our modern predicaments. By highlighting the historic roots of political protest parties such as Freaknik and Greek Picnic, it becomes clear that these events are vast importance in order to recognize the role of race, economics, and political power in modern urban areas. This thesis hopes to guide future scholars in their search for black youth who challenge their surroundings in ways typically outside the view of traditional academia. Moving away from a strict focus on the period directly before and after the traditional civil rights movement, this work encourages scholars to look towards the recent history of black youth in order to analyze the gains and continuations of the traditional civil rights movement. Only

by acknowledging the influence of the traditional movement can academics move forward to address the issue of how large congregations of African American youth are treated by large metropolitan areas in America. While much work is still to be done, this thesis guides those seeking to explore these complex issues.

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