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What's Happening in Music City?: A Story of Racial Stratification and Cultural Erasure in Nashville, Tennessee

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WHAT'S HAPPENING IN MUSIC CITY?:

A STORY OF RACIAL STRATIFICATION AND CULTURAL ERASURE

IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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CHAPTER I. Introduction

While I was home in Nashville, Tennessee over spring break, and about three quarters of the way through writing this thesis, I spent the better part of a week helping my mom move into her new office. She has served as the homeless education liaison for Metro Nashville Public Schools for almost 25 years now, and is currently in the process of finally getting a space of her own. Up until the move, she worked out of a portable trailer in the back parking lot of the Board of Education, running her entire program giving out clothing, school supplies, and other necessities to 3,000+ students experiencing homelessness in the Nashville area in a space just slightly larger than most Vassar students' freshman year dorm rooms.

Her new office is located in the recently vacated Buena Vista Enhanced Option School, an elementary school located in North Nashville which shut down at the end of the 2019-2020 school year due to low enrollment. Though the school has not been in use for nearly two years now, the entire building remains eerily full— messages on white boards, field trip permission slips on top of library shelves, safety scissors with students' names written on them, and hundreds of books all remain in the space. I felt a strange lingering sadness in the space. The hope, joy, and community that was once built there was put on pause by the pandemic but remains palpable, as does its abandonment. There is still a large cardboard box filled with jackets, backpacks, stuffed animals, and other personal affects that students left on their last day of in-person school at Buena Vista in March 2020, unaware that they would never attend school in that building again.

A strange and hopeful transition is taking place at Buena Vista. My mother has been offered the opportunity to transform the space into one that serves the community; she is

able to open her doors to students and families, engage with more volunteers, and have a more permanent place in the city. The move also forces one to confront the harsh reality of temporality, vulnerability, and rapid change in Nashville. As I wandered the halls, moving supplies from room to room, I began to think of the work that I had done on this thesis thus far. For me, Buena Vista represents so many of the feelings that I have both embraced and struggled with as I write about my hometown. It is at once empty and full, stagnant and lively; individual perception has a drastic impact on the lessons to be learned from spaces that have been vacated, repurposed, or deemed non-essential.

So much of Nashville is in this strange transitional period right now. Neighborhoods, homes, and businesses have been deemed "blank slates" by those in power despite their significance to marginalized communities. Developers and tourists and newcomers pick and choose which parts of the city they want to preserve or commodify, laying claim to cultures, communities, and histories that are not theirs. A sense of emptiness and futility is pervasive, as is a sense of hopefulness and potential. This is not to say that all change is bad and that complete preservation is essential, but it remains significant to me as a lifelong Nashvillian that similar to the students at Buena Vista, so many longtime residents of the city are being displaced and pushed out and forced to relinquish ownership of their communities— with all of this movement being controlled by a local government that views people as replaceable on a whim, focusing more on moving capital than on engaging with citizens.

Having a significant emotional attachment to the content that I have been writing about has been difficult. I have had several conversations with mentors and family members and friends about how to temper my own emotional reactions to the current situation in my hometown, while also embracing the power of these emotions and using them to inform my

research and my writing. I suppose this is all to say that as I write this, I feel quite conflicted about the future of the city that I have known and loved for twenty two years now. Spaces that have been labeled empty and (re)developable contain so much history and passion. Harnessing this history and allowing marginalized groups to lead the way in the city's redevelopment is a necessity that is often framed as a challenge or an inconvenience, when in reality it is the only way forward for our city in order to shift the current pattern of white supremacy and careless destruction of Black cultural institutions.

Framing

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which three neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee— Edgehill, North Nashville, and Downtown Nashville— are in varying phases of an ever-repeating cycle of segregation and redevelopment. The histories of these neighborhoods provide compelling evidence of the ways that Black populations are displaced, disregarded, and disrespected in the process of neighborhood redevelopment and change in the city. As Nashville undergoes unprecedented levels of development, these case studies serve as a real-time analysis of the ways that tourist-centric development takes advantage of hidden histories to reshape vulnerable neighborhoods and erases community and culture in the process. I chose to focus on neighborhood desirability in Nashville as it is a topic that has been at the forefront of my mind for the past few years now. As I have watched my hometown grow in strange and unprecedented ways over the past few years, I have often questioned the factors that determine when a certain neighborhood is "trendy" or which specific qualities are causing Nashville to jump to the top of "best cities to live in" lists.

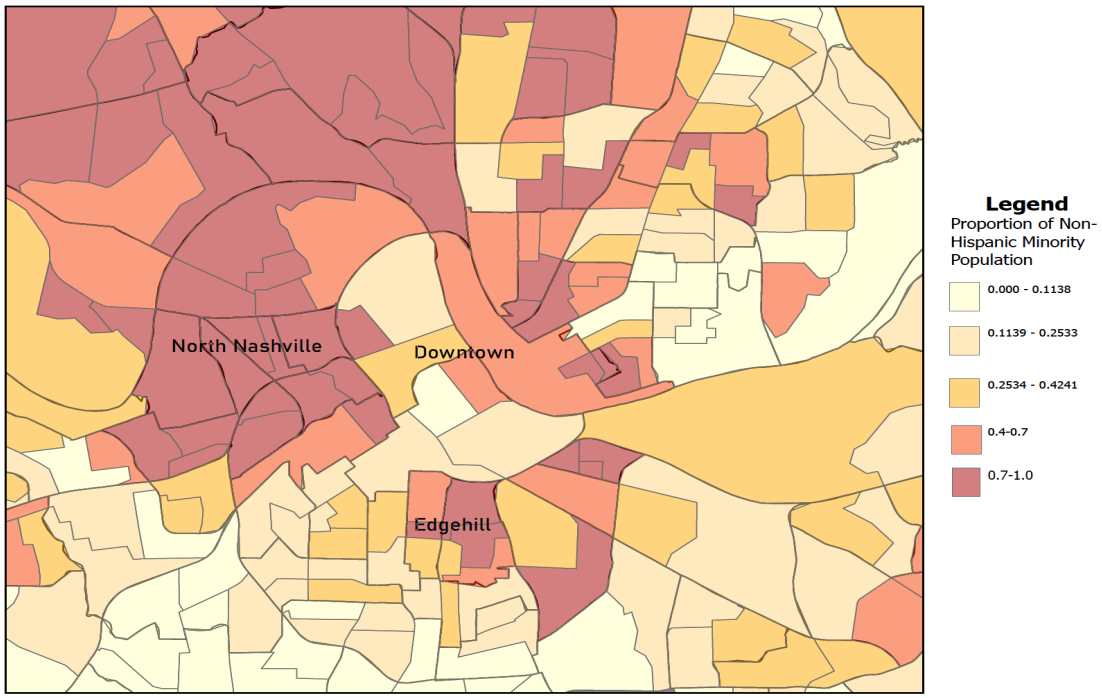

Fig. 1.1. A reference map of the three neighborhoods discussed. *Map by author*.

Neighborhood desirability is undeniably linked to past, present, and future racial fluctuations that are influenced by social, economic, and physical factors that are all deeply rooted in histories of systemic racism, violence, and silencing of Black and low-income populations.

Some Context

Nashville, like many other cities in the southern United States, continues to feel the impact of the legacies left behind by enslavement, Jim Crow, redlining, and persistent white supremacist violence. This impact becomes especially apparent when one looks beyond the surface-level image of the city, which is often portrayed as a progressive haven, a "blue" bubble in otherwise "red" Tennessee. Neoliberal myths act as a cover story for Nashville's history of racism, promoting a false sense of equity that serves to placate the guilt of white participants in systems that perpetuate implicit and explicit violence against Black and low-income communities. In the American South, explain Cameron Hightower and James C.

Fraser, “this is accomplished by creating a past archive of racist practices during an earlier time and distinguishing the present by suggesting all groups have similar opportunities under neoliberalism”.[1] Through its relegation to the past, the influence of systemic racism on local policy in Nashville has managed to remain hidden in plain sight and is often dismissed by those who assume the mentality of a clean slate post-desegregation. An analysis of the implications of race-based spatial segregation and discriminatory development practices in Nashville reveals the ways in which the city has never truly moved on from its racist foundations. Racist myths and the stigmatizations of populations of color result in their relegation to areas of the city that have been deemed less “desirable”, echoing the sentiments of ideologies like redlining and blockbusting. Then, seemingly overnight, these neighborhoods are transformed; taken advantage of because of low property values, their culture and history commodified for the benefit of the white upper-class.

Ownership of the city is in the hands of the white, wealthy, and well-connected rather than long term residents who have a stake in its continued prosperity. The short-term entertainment of tourists takes precedence over the livability of the city as a whole, especially for Nashville’s communities of color who have been pushed to the outskirts of the city away from valuable economic, educational, and cultural resources. As Nashville continues to be named at the top of “best cities to live in” lists, one must ask the question, who does the city of Nashville belong to?

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[1] Cameron Hightower and James C. Fraser, “The Raced–Space of Gentrification: ‘Reverse Blockbusting,’ Home Selling, and Neighborhood Remake in North Nashville,” 225.

Fig. 1.2. An image of Broadway in Downtown Nashville, one of the city's primary tourist attractions. *Photo by author.*

Defining Segregation

As the Dictionary of Human Geography explains, "Human settlements have always been socially stratified and those designated as "others"- whether based upon religion, culture, economic status, or any other social division, have been relegated to specific, usually environmentally poor, places. Thus, social marginalization is almost always associated with spatial segregation".[2] When moving forward with a definition of racial segregation that will be used to understand the situation in Nashville, one must evaluate the extent to which Nashville's racial history has created a unique set of circumstances that have allowed for segregation to persist despite its formal illegality. The three neighborhoods that I discuss in each of my chapters are sites of past segregation that are rapidly transforming due to Nashville's development as an "it" city. It is important to have an understanding of the history of segregation in the city in order to break down these transitions and

[2] Derek Gregory, *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Blackwell, 2017).

understand why these neighborhoods were made vulnerable to rapid gentrification and encroachment upon decades, if not centuries, of cultural history and community building.

Though there are no longer laws in place that explicitly bar Black people from living in certain neighborhoods, shopping at certain stores, or eating at certain restaurants, a perfect storm of social and political factors have maintained Nashville's status as a racially segregated city in which Black residents are relegated to underfunded and under-resourced areas, and then blamed for the "problems" in these areas. One could even contend, as Richard Rothstein does in *The Color of Law*, that the political and social conditions leading to contemporary segregation are just a new way of making segregation legal again in a post-Jim Crow world. As Rothstein argues, "Prohibiting discrimination in voting and restaurants mostly requires modifying future behavior. But ending *de jure* segregation of housing requires undoing past actions that may seem irreversible".[3]

Additionally, it is crucial to understand contemporary geographic segregation not as the result of cultural preferences or norms but rather as caused by intentional discrimination rooted in systemic racism and white supremacy. Rather than assessing segregation as following inevitable social patterns, we must move toward an understanding that racial segregation is a result of, as Rothstein writes, "unhidden public policy that explicitly segregated every metropolitan area in the United States".[4] By understanding how segregationist policies remain *unhidden*, but are still considered socially acceptable, we can begin to break down false perceptions of societal advancement and "color blindness". Federal and local governments are still intentionally and blatantly reinforcing segregation,

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[3] Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2018), 177.
[4] Rothstein, VII.

effectively normalizing social and racial stratification and making it seem like a cultural pattern rather than an intentional process. This stratification undoubtedly shapes our cities and how they are perceived and experienced by outsiders and residents alike. As a result, segregation in Nashville is normalized and racial stereotypes are used to carefully lay the groundwork for blame-shifting, pushout, and patterns of development that associate desirability with the racial makeup of neighborhoods.In Nashville, racial stratification shapes neighborhood demographics and culture, social and economic development, and neighborhood vitality and viability in ways that can not be ignored. Moving forward, it will be important to apply this analysis of segregation as an ever-present, ever-evolving phenomenon to case studies of Nashville neighborhoods that are undergoing rapid redevelopment in the wake of the changing city, understanding the ways in which past attitudes shape present and future built environments.

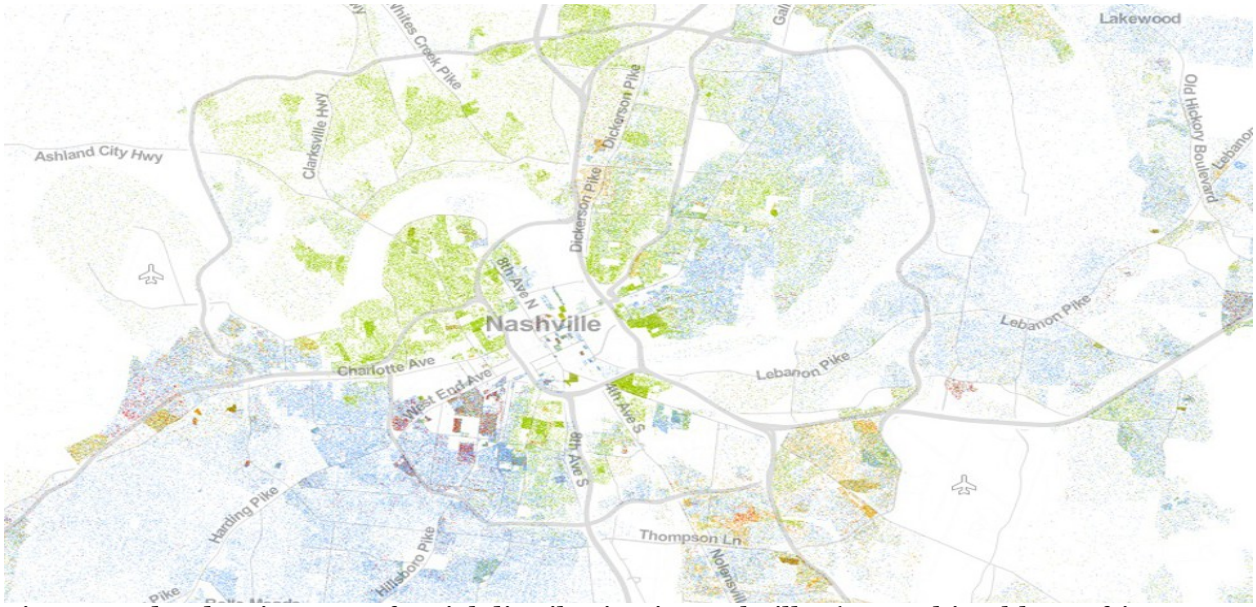

Fig. 1.3. A dot density map of racial distribution in Nashville. (Key: white: blue; African-American: green; Asian: red; Hispanic: orange; all other racial categories: brown.) *Nashville Scene.*

I argue that Nashville's status as a segregated city with populations of color increasingly being pushed to the outskirts of the city lays the groundwork for further pushout and gentrification, setting up low-income Black and Brown neighborhoods as easy targets for predatory development and taking agency away from these communities. The three neighborhoods that I discuss are examples of this process at varying stages, and demonstrate the ways that communities of color are first made vulnerable by racist public policy and then exploited due to this manufactured vulnerability.

A Brief History of Civil Rights in Nashville

The racial history of Nashville is incredibly complex, nuanced, and difficult to paint a full picture of. However, it is important to have a basic understanding of major historic events in order to analyze the impacts of these events on the contemporary city. What follows is a brief and by no means exhaustive history of Black placemaking and the Civil Rights movement in the city.

After the Civil War, Tennessee moved more quickly than the other Confederate States to rejoin the Union, a sign to some that the state was ready to begin the work toward a more politically equitable future. This difference is noted by Vanderbilt University Professor Gabriel A. Briggs who writes that "Unlike most urban centers in the South, Nashville escaped the Civil War relatively unscathed, a circumstance that allowed for a degree of economic prosperity that benefited not only the white community but also the African American community, which had grown very large during and immediately following the war".[5] Formerly enslaved Tennesseeans settled near the military encampments of Black troops, and many of these areas developed into predominantly Black

[5] Gabriel A. Briggs, *The New Negro in the Old South* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 35.

communities like North Nashville and South Memphis.[6] Additionally, Nashville became a hub for many new cultural, religious, and economic institutions for Tennessee's Black population.

Despite this social and cultural development, the war's legacy of racism and political bitterness lasted through Reconstruction. The emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in 1867 and the enactment of Jim Crow Laws in the 1870s and 1880s led to white supremacist violence such as lynchings, beatings, and arson. In complete ignorance of this state-endorsed violence, the South still continued to promote an image of peace, and in 1897 Nashville hosted the Tennessee Centennial Exposition Showcase, drawing nearly two million visitors, in an attempt to demonstrate the city's supposed postwar rehabilitation.[7] Governor Robert Taylor is quoted as having remarked that "Some of them who saw our ruined country thirty years ago will certainly appreciate the fact that we have wrought miracles".[8]

During the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nashvillians fought to make the supposed "miracle" of the postwar South function for them too. The Nashville lunch counter sit-ins began on February 13, 1960, led by members of the Nashville Student Movement and the Nashville Christian Leadership Council.[9] Many legendary Civil Rights Movement leaders, such as Diane Nash and John Lewis, got their start organizing with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Nashville. As noted on the SNCC digital gateway website, "By putting their bodies on the line to bring attention to the racist violence that existed in America, and by being among the first to leave school and work full-time for

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[6] "Reconstruction and Rebuilding," A History of Tennessee Student Edition, accessed November 10, 2021, https://tnsoshistory.com/chapter7.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Samuel Momodu, "Nashville Sit-Ins (1960) ," Black Past, February 28, 2020, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/nashville-sit-ins-1960/.

SNCC, the Nashville students pioneered a new commitment from young people that advanced Black struggle and social change".[10]

The peaceful protests at the lunch counters lasted for three months, until on April 19 the North Nashville home of NAACP leader Z. Alexander Looby was bombed.[11] This assassination attempt, which Looby and his wife survived, was the catalyst for a three thousand person march to City Hall during which Black students and white allies demanded that Mayor Ben West desegregate the lunch counters. To the surprise of many, he agreed, and on May 10, 1960, Nashville formally desegregated its lunch counters.[12]

This one example in no way encompasses the total history of the Civil Rights Movement in Nashville, and I encourage readers to explore its legacy more deeply—especially those raised in Nashville who, like myself, often receive little to no education about its aspects in school. The history of the Civil Rights Movement in Nashville is symbolic of the larger picture and of the resilience of Nashville's Black community. It is important to reflect upon Nashville's history of powerful Black leadership, especially student leaders, as a preface to my discussion of contemporary manifestations of segregation and racism in the city. Nashville's history of Black community, culture, and leadership is often overshadowed by those who attempt to repurpose it for their own agenda; one of the erasure of contemporary problems and the promotion of the rhetoric that Nashville is a completely progressive city. Stories from the era of the Civil Rights Movement are often spotlighted as reasons why Nashville should be viewed as a progressive haven in

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[10] "SNCC Digital Gateway," SNCC Digital Gateway, accessed November 13, 2021, https://snccdigital.org/.
[11] Betsy Phillips, "Who Bombed Z. Alexander Looby's North Nashville Home?" Nashville Scene, April 16, 2020, https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/coverstory/who-bombed-z-alexander-looby-s-north-nashville-home/article_d8bc0bc5-132f-5bd8-9153-274c43a94190.html.
[12] Ibid.

the South. I want to challenge this idea, as I think it often allows white Nashvillians to adopt a sense of ignorance about current issues in the city, but not without honoring the importance of these stories.

What's Happening in Music City?

In *I'll Take You There: Exploring Nashville's Social Justice Sites,* Amie Thurber and Learotha Williams Jr. provide a thorough examination of Nashville's social justice history, noting the geographic importance of many places in the city and the role that they played in ongoing activism in the city. Thurber and Williams write that

> "Beginning in the 1950s, racial justice organizers convened in neighborhood schools and churches to develop strategies to advance the civil rights movement. After staging some of the first student-led sit-ins in downtown Nashville, their tactics of nonviolent protest quickly spread throughout the South. Yet the same neighborhoods that seeded the Movement later proved vulnerable to government-led disinvestment and demolition".[13]

How can a city with such a rich history of social justice completely overshadow this history and ignore its broader implications for our present and future? To attempt to honor the past is one thing, but to put lessons from the past into action is another— and that is exactly what Nashville fails to do. The concepts of disinvestment and demolition raised by Thurber and Williams are significant in the process of the erasure of Black history and community in Nashville in favor of turning the city into a tourist attraction.

Nashville's development centers on tourists and wealthy new residents, with the two primary areas of development being entertainment in Downtown Nashville and luxury housing in many areas across the city. Neither of these foci prioritize the needs or wellbeing of residents, and often inconvenience them. In 2019, a study determined that the average monthly cost of living in Nashville was $2,192.76, ranking it as more expensive than other

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[13] Amie Thurber and Learotha Williams, Jr. eds., *I'll Take You There: Exploring Nashville's Social Justice Sites* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2021), 6.

similarly sized cities in the Southeast like Atlanta, Charlotte, and Orlando.[14] Nashville takes in an estimated 14.5 million tourists a year[15], creating a notable rift between its longtime residents and those who view the city as a fantasy destination to "let loose" for a weekend.

This development also creates a sense of dispossession for lifelong residents, making parts of the city almost unrecognizable through the continual development of luxury high rises and tourist attractions. Marginalized populations are especially vulnerable to the material impacts of this dispossession, such as being priced out of their homes due to new development. Gentrification in Nashville is a large part of the reason that Black and Latinx communities are concentrated in the outer circle of the city. The city center is being rapidly developed and whitewashed in order to appeal to tourists to whom developers attempt to present an image of a chic vacation spot rather than a place where people have lived their whole lives. This exacerbates the racial stratification of the city's population by using racist stereotypes to justify the displacement of residents of color who do not fit into the narrative of Nashville as a city for young, successful white people.

A segment about racial dynamics in Nashville aired on Nashville Public Radio in the summer of 2020, at the peak of protests responding to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Nashville Public Radio noted that despite narratives of racial progress in Nashville, Black residents are more than twice as likely to be stopped by the police in the city, and the 37208 zip code (North Nashville) has the highest incarceration rate in the

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[14] Alex Soderstrom, "Nashville's Cost of Living Outpaces Atlanta and Charlotte, Study Finds," Biz Journals, 2019, https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2019/07/16/nashville-s-cost-of-living-outpaces-atlanta.html.

[15] "Greater Nashville Qualified Opportunity Zones," Opportunity Zones (Greater Nashville Regional Council, 2019), https://www.greaternashvilleqoz.org/main.

country.[16] Nashville obviously has a great deal of reconciliation to do when it comes to racial dynamics in the city, and I believe this reconciliation begins with acknowledging the deep roots of these dynamics in systemic racism, segregation, and the pervasiveness of anti-Black stereotypes in the vision of Nashville as an ideal progressive Southern city.

Chapter Outline

In pursuing this topic, I focus specifically on three neighborhoods of the city—Edgehill, North Nashville, and Downtown Nashville. These three neighborhoods tell different but interlinked stories about the evolving impact of segregation and racial stratification in the city. By focusing on three distinct areas, I aim to illuminate the variety of ways in which Nashville's spatial and social segregation is created and enforced by local development policy and is linked to the city's racial history. I have chosen these three neighborhoods as similar but unique examples of shifting neighborhood desirability at the hands of white capitalist intervention in the city.

In Chapter Two, I focus on Edgehill, a historically Black neighborhood that was established after the Civil War. Edgehill tells a compelling story of white corporate encroachment. Residents are rapidly being priced out, their homes thoughtlessly destroyed and replaced by overpriced homes targeted at young wealthy newcomers. A neighborhood that was once an enclave for a thriving Black middle class has been repurposed and repackaged to serve wealthy white newcomers, erasing a storied history of Black placemaking.

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[16] Damon Mitchell, "60 Years after the End of Segregation, Nashville Is Still a Long Way from Reconciliation," WPLN News - Nashville Public Radio, May 28, 2021, https://wpln.org/post/60-years-after-the-end-of-segregation-nashville-is-still-a-ways-from-reconciliation/.

In Chapter Three, I write about North Nashville, another historically Black neighborhood that is suffering the effects of gentrification and redevelopment. In March 2020, a tornado tore through the neighborhood, destroying many homes that had been there for decades. North Nashvillians fell prey to disaster capitalism, being targeted by developers seeking low-cost land and residents that they could exploit. The culture of North Nashville is rapidly shifting due to this redevelopment, with many residents left with no choice other than to accept low offers for their homes and move out of the area before they are evicted or displaced in some other way.

In Chapter Four, I explore the tourist center of Nashville— Downtown. The story of Downtown Nashville is one of neoliberal capitalist development aimed at tourists and producing revenue for the city. It is a story of erasing the rich cultural history of Black Nashvillians in favor of an image of the city that makes white visitors feel comfortable. My discussion of Downtown Nashville explores its connections to the tourism industry, rapid capital accrual, and complete erasure of previous histories.

Altogether, the histories of these neighborhoods tell the story of a city that refuses to come face to face with its race problem. Deeply rooted white supremacy and anti-Blackness plague Nashville's social and public policy, making many spaces of the city unwelcoming for nonwhite residents. Through social and geographic segregation, Black communities in Nashville are cut off from the rest of the city, relegated to neighborhoods on the outskirts of town, ignored, and blamed for problems that arise. As Nashville continues to be marketed as one of the country's most "desirable" cities, I believe it is crucial to explore the evolution of desirability through the lens of segregation. Through these case studies, I aim to promote an understanding of how the pervasiveness of contemporary forms of segregation in

Nashville influences neighborhood development politics in an unprecedented era of urban growth.

CHAPTER II. Edgehill

Edgehill is a historically Black neighborhood located about five to ten minutes from Downtown Nashville. The built environment of Edgehill is one of the most visually striking examples of the impacts of segregation, gentrification, and neighborhood change in Nashville. One one side of the street, you'll see public housing, an elementary school, and an assisted living facility— when you turn the corner, you're met with an edible cookie dough shop, bright neon signs for tourist photo ops, and pay-by-the-minute electric scooters littering the sidewalks. There is a palpable sense of dispossession in Edgehill, as well as confusion about the neighborhood's culture and intended purpose. Exploring the history of Edgehill prompts questions that are a common thread as we explore the past and present culture of segregation and racism in Nashville: Who is the city for? Who stands to benefit from neighborhood development? Whose lives and histories are valued in Nashville?

The transition that one can witness in Edgehill is that of a site of Black culture and community being taken advantage of for its low housing prices and being quickly and forcibly transformed into a neighborhood for young wealthy white people. The situation in Edgehill raises important questions about the desirability of Nashville neighborhoods, especially when it comes to the ways in which shifting desirability is informed by patterns of segregation. In this chapter, I explore the transformation of Edgehill through the lens of segregation and urban renewal, utilizing both personal observations and information from local community organizations to analyze the neighborhood's ongoing cycle of displacement and development.

History of the Neighborhood

A historical marker in Edgehill notes that “The construction and defense of Union fortifications during the Civil War drew many African Americans to the area, where they contributed to the Union victory and the end of enslavement. After the Civil War, they built the free communities of "New Bethel” and "Rocktown” that developed during the twentieth century into Edgehill”.[17] The free communities that were established in Edgehill after the Civil War were crucial in helping formerly enslaved people to establish their agency and individuality after the trauma they endured during the war. Edgehill served as a significant site of Black placemaking in a time when Black southerners were largely unfamiliar with what it meant to be able to exercise their freedom and build their own communities. Thus, Edgehill has a rich history of Black culture and community, being a notable site of the beginning of free life for many community members.

The area of West Edgehill was developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, attracting mainly white professionals because of the newly established streetcar line that could take commuters Downtown.[18] However, after white flight drove affluent white people to the suburbs in the early 1900s, the demographics in Edgehill changed rapidly and drastically, marked by both an influx of Black residents and a mass departure of whites. Neighborhoods farther from the city center became enclaves where white families moved due to racist fear-mongering and a desire to separate themselves from Black populations, whereas Black populations were concentrated near the dismal and polluted Downtown.

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[17] “History of Edgehill Historical Marker,” The Historical Marker Database, December 14, 2020, https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=162478.

[18] Michelle Ness, “A Short History of Edgehill,” The Edgehill Neighborhood Coalition, October 14, 2018, https://edgehillcoalition.wordpress.com/edgehill-a-short-history/.

Due to the already established significant Black population in the area, Edgehill was able to flourish during this period and provided a safe and comfortable space for Nashville's Black residents to thrive in a place of shared cultural and racial identity. As noted on the Edgehill Neighborhood Coalition's website, "With doctors and lawyers living on the west end and locally-owned commercial businesses on the other, Edgehill was a thriving, self-sufficient African American community".[19] This unprecedented level of self-sufficiency and community no doubt had a lasting impact on the neighborhood culture of Edgehill as a space of unity, hope, and independence. As white flight continued in the 1940s and 1950s, the growing Black middle class found a home in Edgehill, establishing their ability to be upwardly mobile in a city that had repeatedly cast them aside.

This independence and sense of community did not make Edgehill residents immune to attempted city planning and zoning interventions. In 1954, the Edgehill public housing campaign was completed. This campaign, which intended to eliminate deteriorating public housing structures, also completely shifted the traditional layout of the neighborhood and minimized neighborhood commercial space, significantly reshaping social and economic dynamics in the neighborhood.[20] This change can be seen as the beginning of physical and social encroachment on the established neighborhood, serving as an example of the ways in which outsider assessments of neighborhood structures often fail to fully comprehend what is at stake for a community.

In the 1960s, urban renewal ideologies made their first appearance in Edgehill through the federal urban renewal program, which deemed the neighborhood "blighted"

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Civic Design Center, "Edgehill Neighborhood Study," Issuu, January 23, 2018, https://issuu.com/civicdesigncenter/docs/edgehill_book.

and attempted a complete restructuring of its physical and social environment. The goals of this program included "the expansion of neighborhood schools and parks, the widening and realignment of certain streets, the redevelopment of public housing, the elimination of incompatible land uses and obsolete structures, the separation of storm water and sewage lines, and the clearing of land for the expansion of Belmont University".[21] The impacts of this program are still visible in Edgehill today, both in the physical environment and in the social climate of the neighborhood.

Here, I explore the ways in which legacies of segregation and racist redevelopment have impacted Edgehill, looking specifically through the lens of desirability and the way that Edgehill has been reshaped over decades by upper-class white intervention. Edgehill's transformation from a once desirable commuter neighborhood to a Black enclave speaks volumes about the ways in which affluent white people have complete power in determining "desirability" of neighborhoods— a pattern which can be observed in each chapter of this thesis. Indeed, Edgehill is currently undergoing yet another transformation to a new "hot spot" for tourists and new residents, again flipping the script about desirable neighborhoods to fit the preferences and needs of upper class white populations.

[21] Ibid.

Population Estimate, July 2021	703,953
White Population	65.5%
Black Population	27.4%
Other races	7.1%
Median Gross Rent, 2016-2020	$1,172
Building Permits, 2020	13,324
Median Household Income	$62,515
Persons in Poverty	12.8%

Fig. 2.1. General statistics about Nashville's population from the 2020 Census. *The United States Census Bureau.*

The Right to the Neighborhood

A quick google search of "Edgehill Nashville TN" turns up results ranging from home listings on realtor.com, advertisements for luxury apartments, and a list of businesses in the neighborhood provided by tourism website Nashville Guru. In short, none of the aforementioned history of Edgehill is readily available from this google search— the closest to an acknowledgement of the neighborhood's history comes from a blurb on a luxury apartment website: "Deeply rooted in one of Nashville's oldest neighborhoods are stories untold and characters waiting to be discovered. NOVEL Edgehill is a blended experience, homegrown charm weaved with urban vitality and community at the forefront".[22] These descriptions of "untold" stories and "undiscovered" neighborhood culture are a sharp and distressing example of the ongoing cultural erasure taking place across the city of Nashville.

[22] "Luxury Apartments in Nashville, TN." NOVEL Edgehill. Accessed January 5, 2022. https://www.noveledgehill.com/.

What is largely concerning is the fact that this "vibrant community" is part of what is being commodified and marketed to wealthy newcomers to the neighborhood. As Edgehill continues to undergo rapid development, developers are attempting to use the neighborhood culture as a selling point while also disrespecting and displacing those who created and sustained the culture in favor of a newer, whiter, wealthier population.

Despite this erasure, the community and culture built in Edgehill when it was first established is still palpable in the neighborhood today. The neighborhood's Black community thrives on community partnerships between churches, schools, and senior housing, and neighborhood festivals are held at the local park and community garden.

Gentrification and tourist-centric development in Nashville have in no way remained untouched by the city's deep roots of segregation. Black culture in predominantly Black communities (which were primarily created due to the stigmatization and fear of Black populations) is undergoing whitewashed commodification, being defined instead as "homegrown charm" and "urban vitality" in a way that displaces and erases Black residents and allows white residents to benefit from cultural spaces created by previous patterns of segregation. It is ironic that so many areas that were once deemed blighted and unlivable due to their predominantly Black populations are now the exact same areas that are being taken advantage of and marketed as "up-and-coming" due to low property values and a flippant disregard for residents. Through its past patterns of spatial segregation, the city of Nashville laid the groundwork for repeated shifts in desirability and marketability of neighborhoods, taking advantage of cultural shifts in order to repackage under-resourced neighborhoods as great new finds, untouched and waiting to be settled by newcomers.

Residents Priced Out

As the neighborhood has evolved, single-family homes have become significantly less affordable for both renters and homeowners. In 2016, a group of researchers at Vanderbilt University and Edgehill community members analyzed demographic shifts in the neighborhood, putting together a report that concluded that Edgehill is in a "State of Emergency" based on the rapid rates of gentrification, home price inflation, and displacement in Edgehill. A 2016 article from *The Tennessean* analyzed the report, noting that there had been nearly 900 properties sold in Edgehill between 2010 and 2016, a sharp jump from just 450 between 2000 and 2009.[23] The high volume of renters in Edgehill (approximately 70% of residents as of 2016) makes it easy for landlords to drive up rents, rendering units unaffordable and bringing in a more affluent renter population. The State of Emergency report displayed significant shifts in racial demographics coming from both directions— a steady increase in white homeowners and renters and a steady decrease in Black homeowners and renters between 1980 and 2010.[24]

The study also noted that in 2016, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Edgehill was $1,711, with 43% of Edgehill residents spending more than they can afford on rent.[25] This combination of an increase in rent and stagnant wages (minimum wage in Nashville has remained at $7.25 an hour since the last time it was raised in 2009) creates conditions in which renters in Nashville can be steadily or rapidly priced out by rent hikes and the sharp increase of cost of living that has been spurred by Nashville's transformation

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[23] Andy Humbles. "Neighborhood Study Declares Edgehill in State of Emergency," The Tennessean, November 19, 2016, https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2016/11/19/neighborhood-study-declares-edgehill-state-emergency/93991154/.

[24] Juanita Beauregard et al., "Edgehill State of Emergency Report ," 2016, https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/aqdu/files/2020/02/BAJ000274-BA-Hons-English-Literature-and-History.pdf.

[25] Ibid.

into a tourist utopia. A March 2018 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics determined that with about 4% of Tennessee workers earning $7.25 or below, Tennessee has the highest percentage of minimum wage workers in the United States.[26] These material conditions have created a situation in which "upward mobility" for low income people of color is a near impossibility, while affluent white populations are able to continue to profit off of the labor of minimum wage workers, supporting the conditions for the continued pricing out and displacement of low income communities of color.

Urban Renewal: Who is it for?

The term "urban renewal" is commonly used to describe approaches and programs that are similar to what is happening in Edgehill. Britannica defines urban renewal as a "comprehensive scheme to redress a complex of urban problems, including unsanitary, deficient, or obsolete housing; inadequate transportation, sanitation, and other services and facilities; haphazard land use; traffic congestion; and the sociological correlates of urban decay, such as crime".[27] Urban renewal philosophies mirror the mindset behind slum clearance, a popular movement to "clean up" areas that were deemed non-functional or blighted. In his piece *The City Quietly Remade: National Programs and Local Agendas in the Movement to Clear the Slums, 1942–1952,* Joseph Heathcott examines the implications of slum clearance in St. Louis, Missouri, calling attention to the ways in which "slum clearance was not so much a technological or economic imperative, but a carefully assembled political agenda to remake the urban landscape".[28] The use of the language of

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[26] "Characteristics of Minimum Wage Workers, 2017 : BLS Reports." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 1, 2018. https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/minimum-wage/2017/home.htm.
[27] The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "Urban Renewal," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed January 20, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-renewal.
[28] Joseph Heathcott, "The City Quietly Remade," *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 2 (2008): https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144207308664, 221.

"remaking" cities is indicative of the general attitude of white power-holders in cities that neighborhoods can be deemed undesirable based on arbitrary assessments that are closely linked to white supremacy and classism— remaking the city for wealthy white landowners and leaving hardly any space for low-income renters.

Developers, politicians, and other stakeholders wrongfully reserve the right to make assessments about such neighborhoods without inquiring with its current inhabitants about the changes that would be best for *them*, instead making way for new, wealthier, and typically predominantly white populations. Though urban renewal is not always characterized by clearance, its implementation often results in the destruction of homes, businesses, and other institutions in neighborhoods without regard for the low-income and Black residents who have built and sustained their communities for generations.

The subjectivity of many of these issues is important to consider, and is a main point of controversy in the conversation surrounding urban renewal. When housing or infrastructure is deemed "deficient" or "inadequate", these designations are typically assigned by outsiders as opposed to those actually living in communities. Though the idea of working toward a solution to urban issues is certainly favorable, it is crucial to consider who is left behind in the processes of urban renewal. Is the neighborhood being renewed for its current population, or for an expected new population?

One of the markers of neighborhood transformation in Edgehill has been the construction of quickly and often cheaply built new homes, which are often incredibly tall and thin in order to accommodate building two residences on land that was previously zoned for one— maximizing the opportunity for developers to profit off of the race-based contemporary redlining that has reduced property values in Edgehill.

Fig. 2.2. A newly constructed duplex in Edgehill, located next to Edgehill United Methodist Church, one of Nashville's first integrated churches which was founded by Bill Barnes in 1966. *Photo by author*.

Edgehill's status as a predominantly Black neighborhood led to a resulting stigma about it being unsafe and undesirable. This historical perception of the neighborhood is now being taken advantage of due to low land costs, leading to the "revaluation" of these neighborhoods, as explored by Zawadi Rucks-Ahidiana in her piece *Theorizing Gentrification as a Process of Racial Capitalism*.[29]

Rucks-Ahidiana argues that "in the context of gentrification, [revaluation] explains how non-White neighborhoods can go from less likely to experience gentrification to being highly valued locations due to their proximity to city centers or the commodification of "diversity" to sell Black and Brown neighborhoods".[30] This point illustrates the ways in which Black and Brown neighborhoods are uniquely positioned to be redeveloped and

[29] Zawadi Rucks-Ahidiana, "Theorizing Gentrification as a Process of Racial Capitalism," *City & Community*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1177/15356841211054790, 7.
[30] Ibid, 7.

unjustly reclaimed by wealthy white residents who stand to profit off of and benefit from the already established culture and diversity of these neighborhoods. Building off of Rucks-Ahidiana's work, I argue that the commodification of diversity in Edgehill and other neighborhoods in Nashville is used as a tool by developers to encourage movement to an area that would otherwise be deemed undesirable, allowing them to market the neighborhood as an exciting and appealing cultural hotspot. This logic gives way to gentrification in that it allows developers to take advantage of low land costs in these areas (often due to their "devaluation" based on race and class population demographics) and profit off of diversity by casting it as another amenity of a new hotspot neighborhood.

One Edgehill resident interviewed for the State of Emergency report, a 71 year old named Ms. Mary, expressed her frustration with the architectural change in her neighborhood: "I'm gettin' smushed in. I don't want all them tall houses next to my property. It's like it's closing you in and you can't breathe… I wish my neighborhood could be saved. I hope Edgehill can be saved". [31] The physical presence of these suffocating new developments and tourist-oriented restaurants and bars targeted at Airbnb patrons signifies a clear message to long-term Edgehill residents like Ms. Mary: you are not welcome here. Lifelong residents— beneficiaries and even creators of the neighborhood culture— are being told that their presence in the neighborhood is no longer "desirable" now that wealthier and whiter populations are finally willing to move to a neighborhood that they once deemed dangerous and "blighted". Edgehill residents are being asked, and sometimes even forced, to vacate the neighborhood that they founded. The looming threat of complete encroachment by the white upper class is palpable in Edgehill, and tensions in the neighborhood are far

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[31] Beauregard.

from being resolved even after the tireless efforts of neighborhood groups and other community members.

The current state of Edgehill paints a picture of the broader state of neighborhood change in Nashville. There is a sharp disconnect between long-term residents of up-and-coming neighborhoods, who are more often than not low-income people of color, and new white residents who are often from out of state and are seeking to take advantage of all that the "New Nashville" has to offer.

What's Next?

In October of 2021, the Tennessee Tribune published an article called *Last Little Bit of Edgehill Up for Sale*. The piece was written by Peter White shortly after the Planning Commission approved a design for a project called North Edgehill Commons, which would include two 9-story, one 8-story, and three 5-story buildings in place of a current parking lot and auto body shop.[32]

Brian Eckert, a local resident, spoke to White about his concerns about the project: "They are suggesting at least 6,000 new car trips per day for that development [...] Six thousand trips in 24 hours is 500 new cars trips every hour, eight cars per second on South St. and Hawkins. Our concern is a public safety concern as a result of density and density comes from height".[33]

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[32] Peter White, "Last Little Bit of Edgehill up for Sale," The Tennessee Tribune, November 10, 2021, https://tntribune.com/last-little-bit-of-edgehill-up-for-sale/.
[33] Ibid.

Fig. 2.3. A rendering of the proposed North Edgehill Commons project. *Nashville Now Next*.

Alice Rolli, another community member and neighborhood leader, voiced unease about the approval process for the project. She told White that Edgehill residents were recruited to tell the Planning Commission that they supported the project because it included a grocery store. White expresses his frustration with this approach, writing that "Such displays are examples of astroturfing and they are designed to give the false impression that a certain policy or project enjoys widespread grassroots support of the community when little such support exists. In short, it was pure theater and the commissioners didn't bat an eye".[34]

White's analysis of the approval process for North Edgehill Commons echoes many of the sentiments from local community members and activists. As Edgehill continues to be developed, the Planning Commission and city government are seeking any type of approval they can, no matter how superficial it may be, to steamroll a community and leave it less

[34] Ibid.

affordable and less welcoming, while also completely disregarding the neighborhood's culture and history. It is important to look at these instances as symbolic of the larger development project in Nashville as a whole. Questions about who the city is really designed for abound when we consider these development strategies and shortcuts that prioritize capital acquisition over human lives.

North Edgehill Commons does not include a single unit of affordable housing, a promise that was made to Black families after urban renewal devastated the area. These examples illustrate the ways in which systemic disinvestment and disenfranchisement of Edgehill residents have paved the way for their neighborhood to be razed and rendered unrecognizable to those who have lived there the longest. They tell a bleak story about the priorities of Nashville's development process. As developments like these continue to pop up all over Nashville, it is crucial for us to consider the ways in which these processes condone and reproduce systemic racism and further disinvestment in Black and low-income communities.

CHAPTER III. North Nashville

The historic Black neighborhood of North Nashville is located just a few miles Northwest of Edgehill. North Nashville is also under an extreme amount of pressure due to the development of the city, and its unique status as Black enclave is a focal point of this tension. In March of 2020, just before the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, a tornado devastated large parts of the neighborhood, destroying homes, churches, businesses, and other places that formed the institutional memory of the neighborhood. North Nashville is in a unique position as a community that has come together to fight gentrification and pushout and to hold onto its history and culture in the wave of disaster capitalism and predatory attempts to destroy what Black community members have built there across decades and centuries.

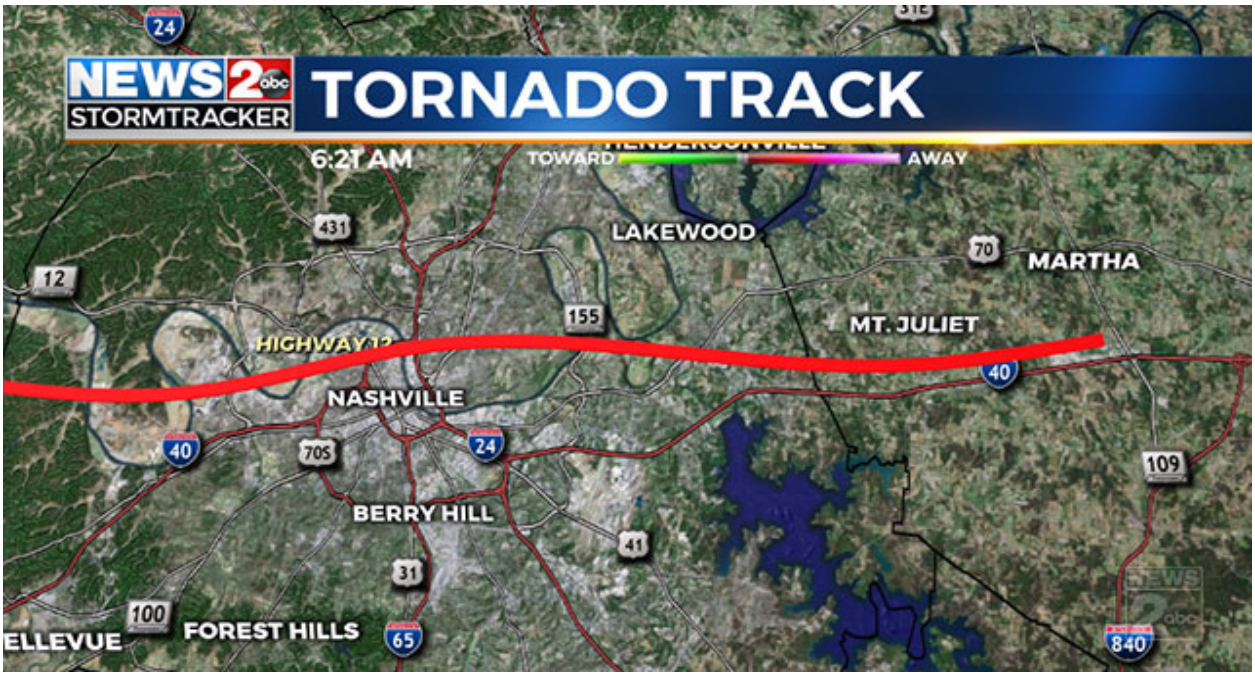

Fig. 3.1. The path of the March 2020 Tornado, which touched down in West Nashville and moved through the North part of the city. *WKRN News 2*.

History of the Neighborhood

North Nashville has long been a site of Black community and culture in Nashville, beginning with the establishment of Fort Gillem, a Union Civil War fort that served as a home to people who escaped enslavement and found a safe space in the Union-dominated territory. General Alven C. Gillem Jr., whose father was the namesake of the Fort, could be considered one of the earliest white participants in the Civil Rights Movement in the area, and famously chaired the Board for Utilization of Negro Manpower, which aimed "to introduce equal opportunity, as that would be the best use of military manpower".[35] Though in our contemporary view this is obviously not the most significant step in the direction of racial progress, it was a notable advancement toward equal opportunity for Black soldiers, encouraging integration of platoons, requiring Black officers to be promoted by the same standards as white officers, and creating education opportunities for Black soldiers.[36]

In 1866, the Fisk Free Colored School was established in Fort Gillem at an abandoned military hospital— the school would later become Fisk University in 1867.[37] This prioritization of Black education and cultural development laid the groundwork for North Nashville to flourish as a site where newly freed Black Americans could pursue the freedom and agency that had been stolen from them during the war. It is significant to note the presence of Black citizens for centuries in North Nashville, who built the neighborhood from

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[35] Bob Henderson, "Fort Gillem: The Legacy of the Gillem Generals ," Battle of Nashville & Beyond, October 9, 2016, https://battleofnashville.com/fort-gillem/#:~:text=Fort%20Gillem%20(1862%2D1865),after%20Brigadier%20General%20Joshua%20W.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

the ground up and established themselves as viable and active community members, fighting against the stigma that followed them after the war.

The development of Black culture and commerce in North Nashville continued into the 20th century, with the rising popularity of Jefferson Street. Jefferson Street was once considered the Northernmost boundary of the city, and was a cultural hub for the Black community in Nashville from the early 1880s to the 1950s.[38] The area was the site of famous R&B clubs that nurtured Nashville's reputation as "Music City" before the country music scene developed in the area with performers like Etta James, Jimi Hendrix, and Little Richard gracing its stages, making the area a vibrant cultural hub and a space where Black culture and community could thrive.

The I-40 Conflict

In the 1960s, the government began the construction of Interstate 40, which would cut directly through the Jefferson Street district. The interstate cut off traffic and a few of the last remaining R&B clubs were destroyed. With the passage of the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, highway planning took on the clear and direct purpose of clearing areas that had been deemed "blighted", and U.S. Secretary of the Department of Agriculture Henry Wallace proposed routing highways through cities as a way to spearhead "the elimination of unsightly and unsanitary districts".[39] As noted in previous chapters, I want to underscore the significance of the arbitrary nature of these types of slum clearance endeavors. They have roots in urban renewal theory and often explicitly target predominantly Black and low-

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[38] "Facing North: Jefferson Street, Nashville ," WNPT, accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.wnpt.org/jefferson-street/.

[39] Linda T. Wynn, "Interstate 40 and the Decimation of Jefferson Street," *Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture* 12 (2019), https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture/12, 1.

income neighborhoods, attempting to relegate vulnerable communities out of sight and out of mind while neglecting to inform these communities about the potential damaging effects of development projects.

The history of I-40 in North Nashville has an unsettlingly prescient similarity to the current residential and business development that is occuring in the area, pricing out lifelong residents and rendering their neighborhood completely unrecognizable. The history of highway development as a mode of "slum clearance" paints a compelling picture about the potential of predatory development— past, present, and future— to transform our cities in irreparable ways. In her article *Interstate 40 and the Decimation of Jefferson Street,* Linda T. Wynn, assistant director for state programs for the Tennessee Historical Commission, researched this issue in depth and uncovered a great deal of hidden history surrounding the construction of I-40, all of which is completely unknown to a majority of Nashvillians who sit in traffic on I-40 every day.

Initially, one of the consultants on the project recommended a route that cut through affluent areas like Belle Meade and Vanderbilt University, but the state of Tennessee went forward with a different proposal that instead cut directly through North Nashville, preventing the interstate from impacting whiter and wealthier neighborhoods and instead demolishing one hundred square blocks in North Nashville.[40]

The Black community in North Nashville was not at all informed of the imminent threat of destruction in their neighborhood, with the Tennessee Department of Highways and Public Works purposefully neglecting to share information about the chosen path of the interstate. When a report leaked the details of the proposed route, professors at Fisk

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[40] Ibid, 1.

University and A&I State University created the Interstate 40 Steering Committee. The committee searched the archives and discovered that the initial proposed route was near Vanderbilt University, but that notices about the public hearing for the proposal were only distributed in white neighborhoods, and every notice had the wrong date for the hearing.[41] This purposeful distribution of misinformation is not unprecedented, and development in vulnerable communities repeatedly follows this predatory and dishonest pattern. The Steering Committee pursued legal action in the U.S. District Court, but the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately denied review of the case, effectively ending the potential for any legal action.[42]

Disaster Capitalism: Redevelopment and (Dis)Investment

The story of the development of I-40 lays important groundwork for understanding the ways in which inhabitants of North Nashville have been consistently disrespected, devalued, and ignored by the city itself. As a historically Black neighborhood that holds so much history and culture in its streets (North Nashville is home to three Historically Black Colleges and Universities— Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee State University, located just blocks from one another), the attempted development of North Nashville is particularly culturally significant. This is yet another example of segregation in Nashville that has made it possible for developers to come in and take advantage of "open" land and vulnerable people. The 2020 tornado made North Nashvillians especially vulnerable to this type of predatory behavior.

[41] Ibid, 2.
[42] Ibid, 2.

Fig. 3.2. An image of some of the damage done by the March 2020 tornado. *The Washington Post/Getty Images*.

At the beginning of her 2007 piece *Disaster Capitalism: The New Economy of Catastrophe*, Naomi Klein quotes Milton Friedman, who says that "Only a crisis— actual or perceived— produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around".[43] This quote is emblematic of many of the issues at hand when it comes to the March 2020 tornado and its impact in North Nashville. I want to particularly call attention to the phrase "the ideas that are lying around", and remind readers of my discussion in the first chapter of racist violence (both physical and emotional) in Nashville. The question remains, then, when the ideas that are lying around are deeply rooted in and even directly constructed by white supremacist, classist, capitalist systems, what kind of change comes from disaster?

North Nashville is a compelling example of shifting tides in a post-disaster world— who spearheads these types of shifts and who rises up against them. Naomi Klein coined the term disaster capitalism, writing that "Every time a new crisis hits [...] the fear and

[43] Naomi Klein, "Disaster Capitalism: The New Economy of Catastrophe," Harper's Magazine, October 2007, https://harpers.org/archive/2007/10/disaster-capitalism/, 47.

disorientation that follow are harnessed for radical social and economic re-engineering".[44] This language is helpful when considering the current state of North Nashville as it is being "re-engineered" to benefit new residents rather than long term community members.

In 2018, North Nashville was designated as an Opportunity Zone by the Trump-era program whose intentions were supposedly to help bring increased revenue into low-income neighborhoods.[45] Interestingly, the Greater Nashville Qualified Opportunity website describes the rich history of Jefferson Street as a main draw to North Nashville, while also mentioning I-40 as a key transportation highlight, failing to acknowledge the complex history of the construction of the interstate and its devastating impact on the community.

Though Opportunity Zones are generally established to drive economic growth to low-income areas, a key aspect of the program is to "[allow] significant tax incentives to taxpayers to reinvest unrealized capital gains in certain properties and businesses located or operating in low-income Census tracts".[46] It is worth considering if this investment of capital serves to benefit those who actually live in the neighborhood, or whether it has an increased negative impact on residents who are seeing investment in their neighborhoods that draws wealthier newcomers and prices them out of their homes.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities notes this tension, writing that

"While the new tax break enables investors to accumulate more wealth, it includes no requirements to ensure that local residents benefit from investments receiving the tax

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[44] Klein, 49.

[45] Kriston Capps, "After Tornado, Nashville Braces for Disaster Capitalism," Bloomberg.com (Bloomberg, June 2020), https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-06/in-nashville-a-tornado-lures-home-speculators.

[46] "Greater Nashville Qualified Opportunity Zones," Opportunity Zones (Greater Nashville Regional Council, 2019), https://www.greaternashvilleqoz.org/main.

break. Thus, this tax break could amount to a "subsidy for gentrification" in many areas instead of, as intended, for providing housing and jobs for low-income communities".[47]

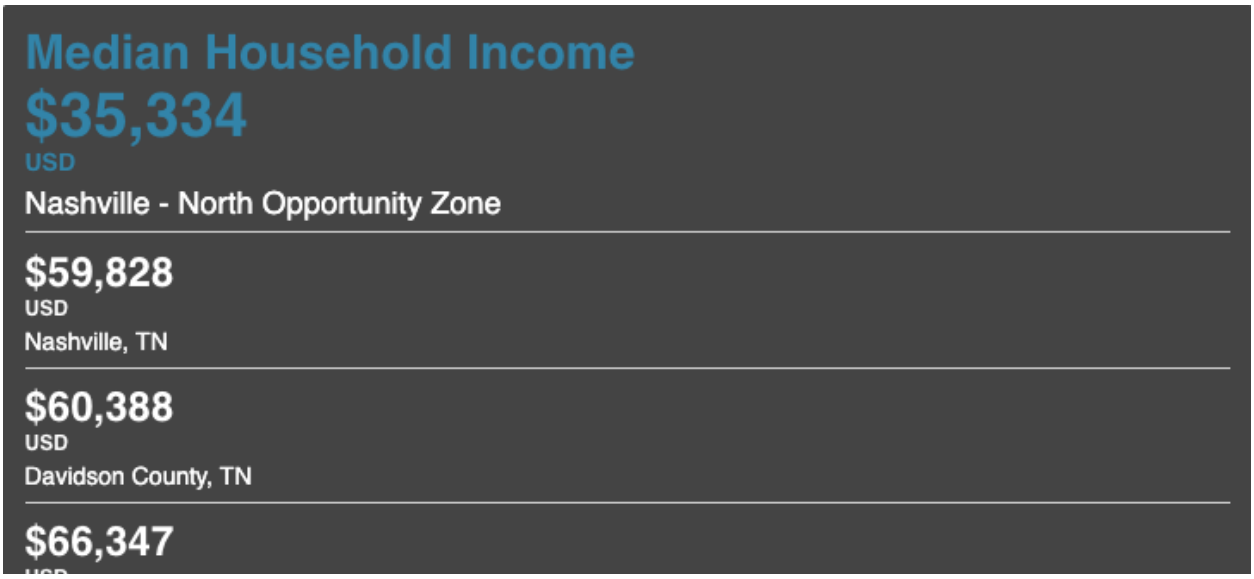

Fig. 3.3. The median household income levels in North Nashville, the city of Nashville, Davidson County, and the Metropolitan area. *Greater Nashville QOZ Website*.

Furthermore, designating low-income areas as spaces of "opportunity" for investors rather than spaces of potential growth for residents centers wealthy outsiders and sets a precedent for ignoring the priorities and desires of community members.

This is where Klein's theory of Disaster Capitalism is especially useful: with North Nashville designated as an Opportunity Zone just two years before the tornado, developers already had their eye on the area as a place to grow their capital and expand their influence. This type of growth most often comes at the expense of renters and homeowners who are unable to afford increased rents and mortgage payments and risks their displacement as their neighborhood flourishes with "opportunity". Klein writes that "After each new disaster, it's tempting to imagine that the loss of life and productivity will finally serve as a wake-up

[47] Samantha Jacoby, "Potential Flaws of Opportunity Zones Loom, as Do Risks of Large-Scale Tax Avoidance," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, January 11, 2019, https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/potential-flaws-of-opportunity-zones-loom-as-do-risks-of-large-scale-tax.

call, provoking the political class to launch some kind of "new New Deal." In fact, the opposite is taking place: disasters have become the preferred moments for advancing a vision of a ruthlessly divided world, one in which the very idea of a public sphere has no place at all".[48]

Anne Barnett, a North Nashville resident who was interviewed just hours after the storm, reported witnessing almost immediate attempts to take advantage of the disaster: "'Within two hours, I saw a wealthier-looking, white, middle-aged gentleman walking around, talking to homeowners and handing out business cards,' Barnett says. "We were cutting a tree out of this elderly lady's yard, and I was like, 'What was he talking about?' She was like, 'He wanted me to sell my house.' I was like, 'Are you fucking kidding me?'".[49] Rumors of house offers began circulating quickly around the neighborhood— wealthy developers looking to purchase damaged properties and convert them into pricey duplexes.

801 Monroe

The post-storm redevelopment in North Nashville isn't just impacting residential areas; the business landscape is also drastically changing as a result of the tornado damage. Four story, five story, and ten story mixed use developments have been proposed at multiple sites across the neighborhood. One of the most notable proposals is for a development located at 801 Monroe Street, which would include luxury apartments and retail shops. Nashville's local news network, WKRN, did a story on this redevelopment plan and spoke with councilmember Freddie O'Connell about its potential impact on the neighborhood. O'Connell said that "[His] predecessor…expanded the downtown code up Rosa Parks Boulevard and Jefferson with the anticipation this area of north Nashville deserved a bit

[48] Klein, 47.
[49] Capps.

more capital investment and redevelopment, so I think what we're seeing now, seeds she planted a decade ago, are starting to grow a little bit."[50]

I am interested in the framing of the construction of new restaurants and businesses as "capital investment". O'Connell seems to have a positive outlook on how redevelopment plans will impact the neighborhood, even going so far as to say that "The neighborhood immediately where the project is has been in some ways surprisingly supportive."[51] O'Connell's language is significant here; "in some ways" and "surprisingly" are not the most confident or evocative descriptors. O'Connell did acknowledge some of the tension, acknowledging that "Anything up above five stories starts to feel like something different,"[52] but maintained a generally hopeful stance about the plan.

The fear of the neighborhood starting to feel like "something different" is commonly held among North Nashvillians. Novelist, speaker, and North Nashvillian M. Simone Boyd wrote about these concerns in a guest column for the Tennessean. Boyd recalls her first experiences with community activism and neighborhood collaboration to celebrate and invest in the local community shortly after she first moved to the area, reflecting on the energizing nature of coalition building and bottom-up growth for the neighborhood.

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[50] Erica Francis, "Reshaping North Nashville: 10-Story Development Proposed in Germantown," WKRN News 2 (WKRN News 2, January 18, 2022), https://www.wkrn.com/special-reports/nashville-forward/reshaping-north-nashville-10-story-development-proposed-in-germantown/.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid .

Fig. 3.4. The design for the proposed mixed-use development at 801 Monroe. The building would contain residential units, parking, and retail. *WKRN News*.

She speaks about the potential impact of the 801 Monroe development on the neighborhood, writing that "It is out of scale and scope with our existing historic buildings, and it will advance the erasure of Black people and Black history in North Nashville".[53] The site for the 801 Monroe development also sits across the street from the former office of Nashville civil rights leader Mr. Kwame Lillard, who passed away in 2020, and along the route where marchers protested the bombing of the home of Z. Alexander Looby.[54] Lillard himself was acutely aware of the cultural erasure of Black communities in Nashville, writing in his 2010 piece *A Letter to Nashville*:

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[53] M. Simone Boyd, "Proposed Luxury Building Advances Erasure of Black History in North Nashville," The Tennessean (Nashville Tennessean, February 4, 2022), https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2022/02/04/buena-vista-black-history-north-nashville-erasure-development/6648549001/ (emphasis original).

[54] Ibid.

> "While my generation exposed the naked truths of US racial apartheid and the racial caste system in Nashville, the city's political and economic elites undermined our efforts by initiating policies that harmed the Black community's highly developed cultural politics, economic vitality, educational institutions, and neighborhoods. Sadly, fifty years after Nashville experienced some of the most important civil rights and social justice campaigns in US history, most residents cannot accurately name the dates, places, or targets, the activities of historically Black colleges and universities, (HBCUs), or the legal strategies that defined and augmented the sit-ins, "stand-ins," "sleep-ins," and freedom rides of my generation".[55]

Lillard's perspective on the development of the city is crucial to some of my main observations about Nashville, and I find it especially significant that he was making these comments as early as 2010. Many of Nashville's white or upper-middle class residents might cite Nashville's development as having begun just in the past 5 or so years, but Nashville's Black community has been organizing against displacement, disenfranchisement, and cultural erasure since long before the media decided that Nashville was the tourist hotspot of the late 2010s. The issues that are happening in Nashville are not new, nor are they really all that surprising for marginalized communities who have been on the receiving end of the physical, environmental, and economic harm that is caused by widespread development for decades now.

The displacement of marginalized Nashvillians who are made vulnerable by systems like racism and capitalism is not a new problem, but it is one that becomes more and more apparent every time I return to my hometown. It is crucial to be aware of the fact that these issues may have been more "invisible" in the past, but that their current visibility does not mean that they are any closer to being solved. Striking visual comparisons between new construction homes in Nashville and family homes that have been in neighborhoods for decades have made this issue more visible to those who are not directly impacted by it, but

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[55] Thurber and Williams, 17.

Black and low-income community organizers have been attempting to call attention to these problems for years now. It is crucial to place these voices at the forefront of conversations about effective, sustainable, and equitable city development, and this is exactly what the city of Nashville is failing to do. When we allow people like local politicians and developers to make decisions about what is best for a community that they have likely not even spent more than a few hours in, we silence the voices of those who are impacted and are able to divert local and national attention from the systemic and carefully calculated undermining of the right to the city for Black and low-income community members.

In *The Right to the City,* Henri Lefebvre writes about what he believes to be the basic functions of a city as a space for personal growth and communal interaction.

> "Social needs have an anthropological foundation. Opposed and complimentary, they include the need for security and opening, the need for certainty and adventure, that of organization of work and of play, the needs for the predictable and the unpredictable, of similarity and difference, of isolation and encounter, exchange and investments, of independence (even solitude) and communication, of immediate and long-term prospects. The human being has the need to accumulate energies and to spend them, even waste them in play. He has a need to see, to hear, to touch, to taste and the need to gather these perceptions in a 'world'".[56]

I introduce this concept to call attention to the fact that the deprivation of the right to the city means more than just loss of affordable housing or cultural institutions, though change to the built environment is typically the easiest lens through which to perceive these changes. The bottom line is that by including basic human needs of interpersonal interaction and community building in the conversation about the right to the city to, a lot of the harm becomes much more clear. Nashvillians who are displaced by rapid development lose more than just their homes-- they lose their communities, their

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[56] Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," The Anarchist Library, 1968, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/henri-lefebvre-right-to-the-city.

connections to those around them, and, as Lefebvre would define it, their "world". This mindset is crucial when considering how we must address *the city* as not just a physical space but also a social and emotional one. Social and emotional stakes are high in the case of North Nashville, leaving those Nashvillians who are made most vulnerable by systems of racism and capitalism without a place to call home, both materially and socially. This devastation can not and should not be overlooked.

CHAPTER IV. Downtown Nashville

Downtown Nashville is perhaps the most notable focal point of the city— Nashville has cultivated a surprisingly recognizable skyline, and has made a name for itself as a dream destination for vacationers and tourists looking to get a taste of the South and the country music scene. If you talk to a lifelong Nashville resident, they'll tell you that they hardly ever go Downtown; too much traffic, too many tourists, not "authentically" Nashville. Although most "best things to do in Nashville" lists praise Downtown as a hotspot, it is a breeding ground for tourist traps and not much else. My personal feelings about the area aside, Downtown Nashville is an incredibly significant example of the evolution of neighborhood desirability in the city and its status as a famed tourist attraction makes its transformation perhaps even more strange and even more worthy of discussion.

A few of my friends from Vassar came to visit me for the last few days of spring break, and the five of us spent a night downtown. I was, once again, overtaken by emotions that I had quite a hard time processing. I felt like a stranger in my own hometown; the tourists around us in their pink cowboy hats and matching bachelorette party t-shirts were treating the place that I grew up in like their own personal playground. It was a strange feeling to sit in crowded restaurants and contemplate why I no longer feel welcome in my hometown, and why I am so viscerally upset by its transformation into a place where people go to drink and party for a weekend rather than one whose history and culture is acknowledged and celebrated.

Downtown Nashville is perhaps the most interesting case of the way that the tourist economy has impacted the city, specifically because of its history as a Black enclave and an inherently undesirable area of town due to environmental factors. In this chapter, I explore

the development of Downtown Nashville as a tourist hotspot, highlighting its little known history as one of Nashville's first Black neighborhoods and questioning the way that the distribution of resources in the area has varied based on the racial makeup of its primary population.

Following my discussion in the last chapter of the impact of the March 2020 tornado in North Nashville, it is important to consider how natural and built environments are differently valued depending on populations— this question is especially pertinent in a discussion of Downtown. As we follow the evolution of Downtown Nashville from "the Black Bottom," an environmentally undesirable neighborhood once viewed as a lost cause, to one that is that is now at the top of many people's travel bucket lists, it will be important to reflect on the tourist economy, local government oversight, and who the city is truly built for.

History of the Neighborhood

In his article "The City and the Slum: 'Black Bottom' in the Development of South Nashville, James Summerville writes about the reputation of the neighborhood in the late 1890s and 1900s;

> "Even before 1900, the reputation of the area south of Nashville's lower Broad Street was sufficiently unsavory to warn away any citizen careful of his time, his purse, and his life. The very mention of the name "Black Bottom" conjured up visions of rambling tenement houses that overlooked dark and sinuous alleys, the sound of music blaring from the doorways of dimly lit dance halls, the scent of unbathed bodies huddled over a crap game in a basement den".[57]

The area was first inhabited by Irish immigrants who were forced into ghettos due to rampant anti-immigrant sentiment in the 1800s. These first inhabitants cut their own roads

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[57] James Summerville, "The City and the Slum: 'Black Bottom' in the Development of South Nashville," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40 (1981): pp. 182-192, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42626183?seq=1, 183.

in the previously undeveloped area and built tenement-style housing, but this makeshift development had some unforeseen consequences.[58] The neighborhood is located close to the Cumberland River, and dealt with periodic flooding after rainstorms that caused the streets to be caked in dark, thick mud, making living conditions harsh and dismal and causing more established White Nashvillians to avoid it at all costs. Those who had the privilege to avoid this area of town were able to do so, while vulnerable immigrant and Black populations were forced to endure these conditions because they were seldom welcome anywhere else in town. The muddy streets are supposedly how the area first got its name, but the persistence of the name and the stereotypes associated with the neighborhood are more than likely linked to the eventual demographic shift in the neighborhood that resulted in its status as one of Nashville's first predominantly Black neighborhoods. Additionally, there were neighborhoods across the country across the time known as "the Bottom," marked by their status as underserved and under-resourced Black neighborhoods, and once again blaming residents for these issues as opposed to acknowledging the systemic disinvestment in Black neighborhoods that contributes to these issues.

As we also saw with the development of the Edgehill neighborhood, after the Civil War, formerly enslaved Black populations moved to Nashville with the hope of establishing a sense of security and integrating themselves into the post-war South. In 1870, the area was home to 1,844 white occupants and 1,649 Black occupants— all of whom resided in only 741 households.[59] There was a general sense of animosity among the Black and white residents of the neighborhood, who were forced to compete for semi-skilled and skilled labor in the

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[58] Bobby L. Lovett, "Black Bottom," Tennessee Encyclopedia (Tennessee Historical Society, March 1, 2018), https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/black-bottom/.
[59] Ibid.

area.[60] After European immigrants began to integrate themselves into "white" society, deepening and emphasizing the divide between white and Black residents, they left their jobs and their tenement homes behind in favor of moving to more desirable parts of the city.[61] Proximity to the river made jobs at wharves and railroads plentiful, but living conditions dismal. In the 1880s, the development of the streetcar made it easier for white families to commute to and from downtown, moving to the "streetcar suburbs", and the neighborhood became a Black enclave. Ujijji Davis writes about this phenomenon in her piece *The Bottom: The Emergence and Erasure of Black American Urban Landscapes*, arguing that racist housing policies relegated Black Americans across the country to neighborhoods that became known as "Bottoms", writing that "[racist policies] perpetuated public disinvestment and local economic stagnation, directly contributing to the degradation of the housing and other public services and goods".[62]

Laws and ordinances directly targeting Black Nashvillians were widespread in the late 1800s and early to mid 1900s, with one of the earliest laws passed in July of 1905 requiring that Black passengers on streetcars be seated separately from white passengers, in the back of the coach.[63] This ruling led to the formation of a Black owned streetcar company and the *Nashville Globe*, a Black operated newspaper, encouraged a boycott of white owned streetcar lines.[64]

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[60] Samuel Momodu, "Black Bottom (Nashville) (1832-1950) ," BlackPast, June 8, 2020, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/places-african-american-history/black-bottom-nashville-1832-1950/.

[61] Summerville, 183.

[62] Ujijji Davis, "The Bottom: The Emergence and Erasure of Black American Urban Landscapes," The Avery Review, accessed April 18, 2022, https://www.averyreview.com/issues/34/the-bottom.

[63] Summerville, 183.

[64] Ibid.

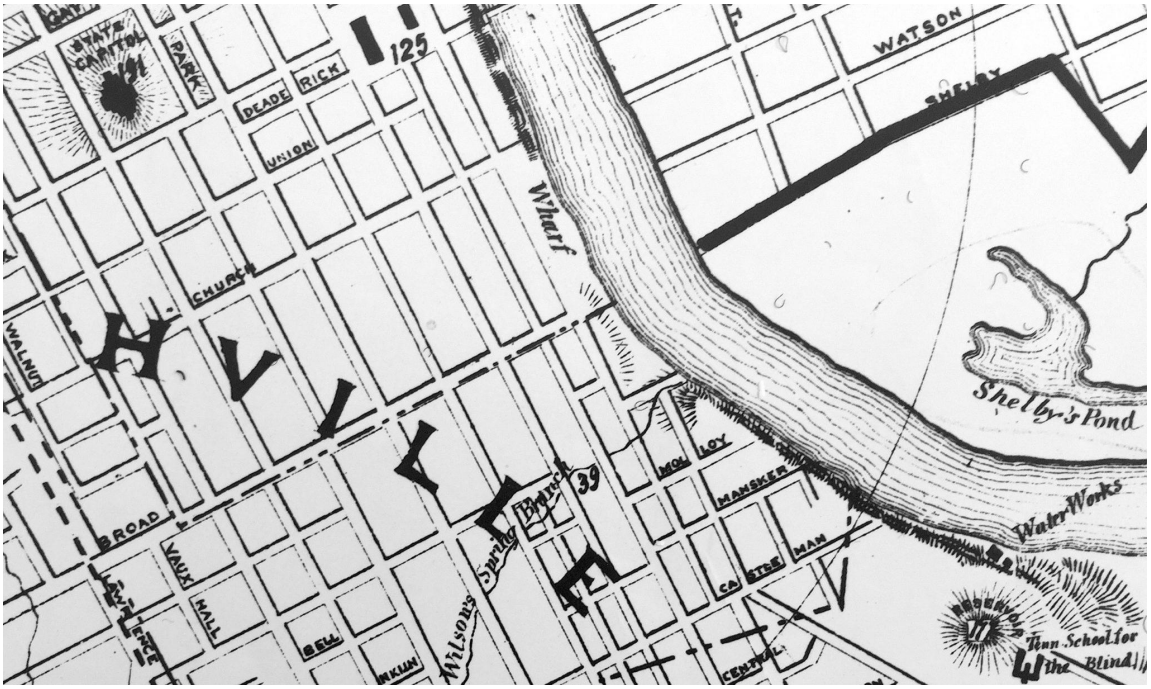

Fig. 4.1. A map of Black Bottom. *WPLN*.

From 1910 to 1930, the *Globe* maintained the largest circulation of any Black newspaper in the state of Tennessee, known for its promotion of racial solidarity and strategies of resistance— encouraging Black Tennesseeans to patronize Black businesses and stressing the importance of political participation and awareness.[65] The *Globe's* influence on Black Tennesseeans was significant, and embraced Booker T. Washington's message of self-reliance for the Black community. This type of leadership and communication was crucial for the Black community of the South, especially those struggling against white supremacist systems to establish their own agency and communities after the abolition of slavery and failed attempts at Reconstruction, which turned into tacit encouragement of separate but *un*equal infrastructure.

[65] Christopher MacGregor Scribner, "Nashville Globe," Tennessee Encyclopedia (Tennessee Historical Society, March 1, 2018), https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/nashville-globe/.

Slum Clearance in Black Bottom

After the neighborhood's transformation from an immigrant settlement into a Black enclave, referring to the area as Black Bottom became a political tool to stigmatize and warn people away from the neighborhood, as well as an excuse for reasons why the neighborhood should be cleared— high crime rates and the ramshackle housing in the area were cited as reasons for this clearing, but there were clearly racial motivations for this clearance motivated by a desire to "clean up" the city. Beginning in 1900, women's groups began efforts to clean up neighborhoods, beginning small-scale projects like encouraging the removal of fences and planting shrubs in public areas.[66] Participants in these projects targeted Black Bottom as a space to be cleared. James Summerville writes that, from their perspective,

> "The immoral aspects of the district, dreadful as they were, could be contained simply by enforcement of the laws relating to liquor, segregation, and vagrancy. But the filthy condition of the tenements, which were homes of the servants who swept their parlors and scrubbed their linens, required that the area be razed as a threat to the entire city".[67]

This project presents yet another example of the racist rhetoric that proposes and even encourages complete clearance of Black communities rather than concerted efforts to improve material conditions in these neighborhoods— proving a connection between neighborhoods labeled as "blighted" and the demographic of its population. Any sort of government intervention or discussion with the community early on could have prevented the supposed need to "clear" the Black Bottom. Black residents were once again blamed for material conditions that they themselves did not create, nor desire to live in, and rather than being approached with solutions proposals were made to tear down cultural institutions and

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[66] Summerville, 184.
[67] Summerville, 185.

community spaces in which residents of the Black Bottom thrived. Developers and citizens were ignorant of the fact that Black Bottom served as a cultural hub for Black Nashvillians, or, rather, they refused to accept the fact that such cultural hubs had a right to exist and saw them as problematic.

Schools, clothing stores, an iron foundry, a bottling company, and other Black-owned businesses created a sense of community amid the dismal built environment, but remained unacknowledged by those who wished to clear the area due to prejudice and stigma. Ujijji Davis writes that "For many, the Bottom became a thriving, aspirational clean slate that served as a refuge and platform for achievement within the oppressive anti-black system".[68] It is this exact feature of Black Bottom in Nashville, and other Black enclaves throughout the country, that incited fear and racist action from neighbors and politicians who did not believe that Black residents had any place in their cities. The development of Black infrastructure posed a threat to those attempting to maintain white-dominated cities, and slum clearance began in Black Bottom under the guise of city improvement— a thinly veiled way of communicating the message that Black residents were not welcome in Nashville.

The Transformation of Black Bottom

This series of events had a decisive impact on the future of Black Bottom, and the neighborhood had a fairly quick and unceremonious decline as a result of racist (re)development policies and "clean up" efforts. By the 1930s, Black Bottom became a less popular neighborhood for Black Nashvillians— the construction of low-income public

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[68] Davis.

housing in East, North, and West Nashville gave residents the opportunity to move out of Black Bottom and into other neighborhoods.[69]

Urban renewal efforts in the 1950s and the continued expansion of Downtown Nashville made it more and more difficult for Black business owners to keep their businesses afloat, and by 1960 Black Bottom was no longer an established Black community in Nashville.[70] Downtown was an important site of Civil Rights activism in Nashville during the 60s, and after the collapse of Black Bottom it began to be developed by white business owners and developers who saw low land costs due to the prior existence of Black Bottom as an advantage. Much of the area was completely cleared to make room for infrastructure that fit the image of what a "cleaner" Nashville looked like— a codified way of communicating that Downtown was not a neighborhood where Black residents were accepted. Civil Rights activists, including a notably large population of Black student activists from Fisk University, challenged this notion, and, as I wrote about in the first chapter, made landmark achievements in the area like lunch counter integration. Nashville is noted as a stop on the United States Civil Rights Trail, and a monument entitled *Witness Walls* was dedicated in 2017 that memorialized sit-ins, boycotts, freedom rides, and other notable activism by Black Nashvillians.[71]

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[69] Momodu.
[70] Ibid.
[71] "Nashville," US Civil Rights Trail (United States Civil Rights Trail), accessed April 18, 2022, https://civilrightstrail.com/destination/nashville/.

Fig. 4.2. An image of the *Witness Walls* project. *US Civil Rights Trail.*

The implications of the complete rebranding and repurposing of Black Bottom after Black residents moved out are quite dismal. I attempted to find information about how the neighborhood was able to be redeveloped to avoid the same issues of flooding and mud that occurred when it was inhabited by immigrants and Black residents, but was unable to find much about this transformation. It is notable that this environmental issue was somehow solved (I have never seen the streets of Downtown covered in mud) but that no attention was paid to the problem while marginalized populations lived there. Instead, they were blamed for the dirty and dilapidated conditions of the neighborhood while simultaneously being effectively barred from changing these conditions or living anywhere else. A lack of government intervention in marginalized neighborhoods until they become marketable to wealthy white people is a common thread with development in Nashville, and I was discouraged but not surprised that I could not find much information on this issue.

Contemporary Development in Downtown Nashville

The area once known as Black Bottom has now been completely transformed into the focal point of Downtown Nashville— Broadway is the tourist hotspot of the city, constantly crawling with hundreds of tourists in cowboy hats and matching t-shirts who have come to visit the honky tonk bars and souvenir shops. The history of the neighborhood as a Black community is not acknowledged anywhere in the area that I've ever noticed, and the tourist development in the city center has rapidly increased the cost of living in Downtown and in the city as a whole. This has resulted in high levels of pushout, especially of low-income Nashvillians working minimum wage service jobs downtown.

The Nashville Business Journal keeps a record of ongoing construction projects in Nashville on their website, entitled "Crane Watch". There are currently over two hundred projects on the list, including luxury apartments, hotels, and university or government buildings.[72] Below is a screenshot of the map— there are enough points on it to give you a headache just looking at it. I use this photo not to point out any specific new developments but rather to demonstrate the truly unprecedented nature of Nashville's current growth. Over sixty of these projects have a budget of $100 million or more,[73] making it clear that much of this development prioritizes wealthy patrons who can further stimulate this growth.

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[72] "Crane Watch," nshtest.maps.arcgis.com (Nashville Business Journal), accessed April 4, 2022, https://nshtest.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Shortlist/index.html?appid=ae87107f05c54caaa88f839572cf08d.
[73] Ibid.

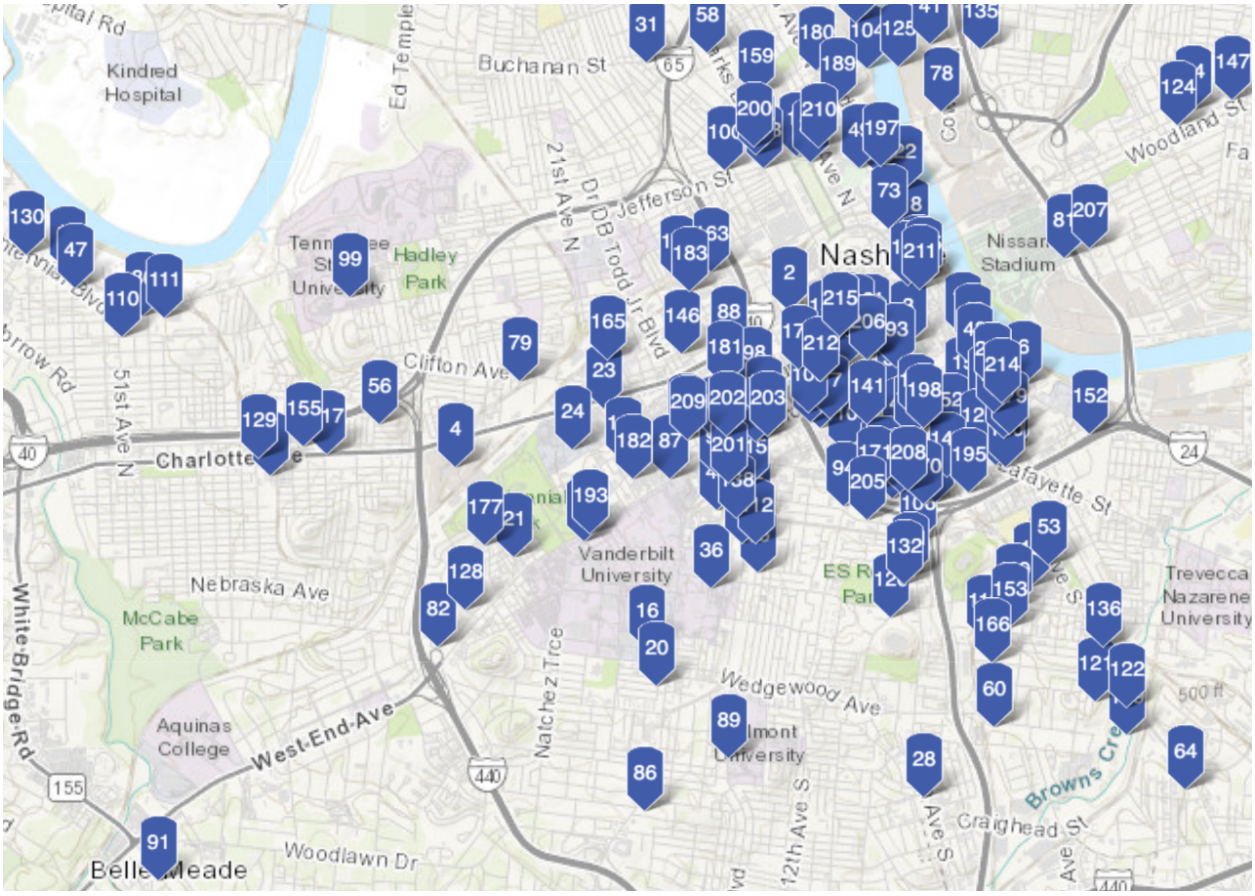

Fig. 4.3. A screenshot from the *Crane Watch* map. *Nashville Business Journal.*

A majority of this development is concentrated in the downtown area, with most of these plans being for apartment buildings, hotels, or mixed-use tourist-based establishments— shops, restaurants, and hotel rooms. It feels incredibly isolating as a lifelong resident to watch the city develop into a place that does little to better itself for its long term population, but is constantly taking steps to invite new visitors to the area. This sense of isolation is increased when one considers the fact that much of this development is happening on the land that was previously home to Black Bottom. The former home of a large amount of Nashville's Black population— who were shunned, subjected to racist legislation, and suffered the impacts of disinvestment in poor communities of color— is now

being repurposed as a space that is completely ignorant of that history and markets the city as a tourist's playground.

Chapter V. Conclusion

When I was thinking about the neighborhoods that I wanted to study as a part of this project, I ended up settling on Edgehill, North Nashville, and Downtown because I felt like they represented three unique phases of the pattern that I was tracking; historically Black neighborhoods experiencing disinvestment, stigmatization, and subsequent commodification and redevelopment in Nashville. Edgehill and North Nashville are both neighborhoods in flux, with Black community members fighting for the right to exist in their own communities, and Downtown has witnessed a complete transformation with almost all of its history completely erased. All three of these cases are important in putting together a full picture of the impact of gentrification and redevelopment in Nashville.

I treated this work as a case study in real time, diving into issues that evolved as I wrote this thesis and will undoubtedly continue to evolve for years to come. In the process of writing this thesis, I returned to Nashville four times— in October, November, December, and March— and each time I noticed more and more changes to the city's landscape. As I've mentioned at several points in previous chapters, I struggled a great deal with the emotions of isolation, confusion, and unfamiliarity in my own hometown. I wanted to be upfront about the emotions that I experienced throughout this process in order to foreground the social and emotional impact that Nashville's development has on residents. This is not just a matter of capital accumulation or built environment change— it is one of irreparable emotional damage, at times verging on emotional warfare against Nashville's most vulnerable and systemically disenfranchised residents.

Embedded in the development of the city is a continuing history of physically and emotionally violent racism that remains overlooked by those who look upon the city's

growth as an inherently positive thing. I wanted to reconcile with the fact that as a white resident, I have not experienced the same level of emotional distress or impact as Nashvillians of color who have to fight every day just to feel like they are welcome in their own city. Thus, in this conclusion I found it appropriate to explore local activist movements fighting against racialized gentrification in Nashville. I want to underscore the fact that the problems I've discussed in these chapters are not a lost cause— there is still a great deal of work that can be done, and is being done, to combat the racist neoliberal development ethic that pervades Nashville's landscape. The bottom line is that the current state of development in Nashville is completely unsustainable. The rate at which new projects are occurring presents a threat to long term residents, especially those made vulnerable by systemic racism and neoliberal development ethics. In this conclusion, I explore efforts by residents of my three case study neighborhoods to address these problems in the city and consider what the next steps might be to envision a more equitable, affordable, and community-oriented future for Nashville.

Edgehill

In 2016, researchers at Vanderbilt University conducted a neighborhood study in Edgehill, focusing on the rapid redevelopment of the area. For twelve weeks, community members and researchers convened at Edgehill United Methodist Church to discuss their perspectives on the changes in the neighborhood; at the end of the study, they came up with this list of demands:

What We Want according to a study on the neighborhood:

1. Real estate companies to stop pressuring our neighbors to sell their homes.
2. Development that places people before profit.
3. New construction that fits our neighborhood, and does not crowd us out.
4. A halt to the creation of short-term rentals. We need homes not hotel rooms.
5. To preserve black-owned land, housing, and business.

6. Development that happens with us, not to us.
7. The right to remain in our neighborhood if we choose.
8. Better protections of tenants against problem landlords and unjust convictions.[74]

These demands made by Edgehill residents speak volumes about their perspective on the ongoing development in their neighborhood, and these are the voices that must be placed at the forefront of any and all decision making when it comes to the neighborhood.

I am particularly struck by demand number six: "Development that happens with us, not to us". This, to me, provides a nearly perfect summary of the largest question in the ongoing development of Nashville in other major cities: who is it happening *to,* and who is it happening *for* or *with?* Edgehill residents and other marginalized community members are completely deprived of all agency through the development process, made to feel like pawns in a game of capital accumulation rather than actual human beings who have something at stake in their neighborhood and in their city. Much of this feeling is echoed in Nashville as a whole, the development is happening *to* the city, but not *for* or *with* it. As Nashville grows at an alarming and unprecedented rate, can the city keep up? This is one of my largest concerns as a lifelong resident.

There are numerous local leaders who are working to sustain Edgehill as a community that works for and with its long term residents, including staff and volunteers at the Edgehill Neighborhood Partnership. The ENP has three main branches— The Spot, an after school mentoring program for high school girls, The Free Store, a communal market focused on sharing and redistribution of necessities, and affordable housing advocacy.[75] While exploring the ENP website, I was struck by their messaging on affordable housing. They write that "ENP is committed to being a voice that makes sure that a just and equitable

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[74] Humbles.

[75] "Programs," Edgehill Neighborhood Partnership, 2021, https://www.edgehillneighborhoodpartnership.org/.

[master planning] process will be followed that honors the dignity of the neighborhood and all of its residents". [76] Through staff and volunteer activism, ENP prioritizes Edgehill residents having a voice in the development of their neighborhood.

North Nashville

The 37208 zip code, which is a part of North Nashville, has the highest incarceration rate in the country at 14%.[77] Additional demographic research about the area from The Brookings Institute reports that the child poverty rate in the 37208 zone is 42%, with a population that is 93% Black.[78] In 2021, Fiverr produced a short documentary titled *Out North,* which addresses this alarming statistic while also highlighting local activism efforts to raise awareness for the targeting of Black Nashvillians by police and for the resilience of the community amidst the life altering impacts of mass incarceration. The film is a simultaneously powerful and devastating declaration of North Nashville's history and institutional memory.

In large part, *Out North* highlights much of what's wrong with the public perception of North Nashville. It's crucial for these types of projects to remain widespread in order to promote a more critical understanding of the circumstances in North Nashville and other neighborhoods like it. As local activist Rasheedat Fetuga says, "Our story is North Nashville, but there is a North Nashville in every city".[79]

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[76] "Housing Advocacy," Edgehill Neighborhood Partnership, 2021, https://www.edgehillneighborhoodpartnership.org/housing-advocacy.

[77] Adam Looney, "5 Facts about Prisoners and Work, before and after Incarceration," Brookings (Brookings, March 9, 2022), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2018/03/14/5-facts-about-prisoners-and-work-before-and-after-incarceration/.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Vox Creative, "How This Nashville Community Is Turning Pain into Resilience," Vox (Vox Creative Next, February 9, 2021), https://www.vox.com/ad/22272728/watch-out-north-documentary-north-nashville-fiverr.

The local organization Gideon's Army is spotlighted in the film, with former deputy director Jamel Campbell-Gooch noting how the Brookings Institute study "[…] quantified the harm that the system was doing to its own citizens".[80] Local organizers speak in the film about their concerns about the stigmatization of North Nashville residents and the possibility that this statistic could further the redevelopment of North Nashville and flippant disregard for the lives of citizens. It's crucial to consider the ways in which this type of statistic can serve as an excuse for the disregard for and destruction of Black neighborhoods rather than the implementation of community-oriented solutions— we are witnessing this daily with the approach to development in North Nashville.

Fig. 5.1. *The Legacy Mural*, located at 2701 Jefferson Street, highlights Black history and leadership in North Nashville. It was painted by local Artist Woke3 after the March 2020 tornado in hopes of cultivating and sustaining institutional memory in the neighborhood. *Wokethree.com*.

Downtown Nashville

Perhaps one of the most notable instances of citizen activism in Nashville occurred in summer of 2020 after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked nationwide protests. Organizers and community members occupied the Legislative Plaza for 62

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[80] Fiverr, *Out North*, (Vox Creative Next, February 9, 2021), https://www.vox.com/ad/22272728/watch-out-north-documentary-north-nashville-fiverr, 01:26.

continuous days, asserting a set of demands for Governor Bill Lee and the Tennessee State Legislature surrounding racial justice in Tennessee. Much of their activism surrounded the removal of the bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest, confederate general and first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, from the State Capitol Building.

The group focused on the reclamation of space and the assertion of the right of Black Nashvillians to take up space in their own city. The 62 day occupation of the Legislative Plaza is a significant and powerful example of the reclamation of space by Black activists in a city that refuses to allow them that space, and often actively takes that space away from

Fig. 5.2. A striking contrast between Nashville's tourism and activism; a tourist vehicle drives past People's Plaza activists. *Photo by Alex Kent.*

As part of the occupation, movement leaders renamed the Legislative Plaza *The People's Plaza* or *Ida B. Wells Plaza*. By celebrating the life and legacy of Ida B. Wells, an

early civil rights movement leader, they created a new sense of ownership and embraced the power of counter memory in the space, establishing a stark contrast between the legacies of Wells and Forrest. The juxtaposition of these two historical figures paints a compelling picture of two dueling visions of Nashville; one of progress, equity, and justice, and one of being stuck in the past. It is crucial to consider how these two narratives are used both with and against each other to promote a vision of Nashville that simultaneously upholds the "tradition" of the Old South while also falsely commodifying progressivism and diversity.

Final Thoughts

It's difficult to come to any sort of final conclusions about this topic; it's one that will continue to evolve indefinitely from the moment that I submit this paper. Treating my studies of Edgehill, North Nashville, and Downtown Nashville as case studies in real time, I acknowledge the fluidity of the circumstances and the notion that the push and pull of city development will be impacting these areas and in the city as a whole in myriad ways for years to come.

I'm not going to pretend that it's possible to magically and immediately implement the material solutions to the problems that I've addressed here, as they are occurring nationwide, especially as cities across the country attempt to revitalize their economies after the Coronavirus pandemic caused widespread economic devastation around the world. Nashville itself clearly took quite a large hit during the pandemic, with most of its attractions relying heavily on large groups of people being together in restaurants, bars, or other enclosed spaces. Recalling Naomi Klein's theory of Disaster Capitalism, I am concerned about the long term impact of the "post-COVID" (if we can even call it that, because as cases continue to climb it is difficult to discern when we will ever be able to

determine that the pandemic is “over”) attempt to restructure the tourist economy in Nashville.

My main priority in pursuing this research is to convey the ways fact that we must develop cities to be culturally relevant and culturally aware in order to sustain healthy levels of development without displacing current populations and making cities unrecognizable and unlivable. I continue to feel a great deal of concern about the direction in which Nashville is headed, and the emotional impact of returning to my hometown and hardly recognizing what I see around me plays no small role in my desire to highlight this issue. It’s difficult to convey to outsiders the magnitude of physical and social shifts in a city that they may be visiting for the first time; I’m sure many tourists don’t even realize that the Nashville they’re experiencing is so vastly different from the Nashville that existed ten years ago, or even five years ago.

It is challenging to make this argument to those who see all development as inherently positive. Indeed, we should hope that as our cities change we are able to invite more people in and encourage growth. However, I want to challenge this view of development as something that is always positive and necessary, and pose the questions; what is the cost of development? Who is impacted the most by development? Where is harm directed and where are benefits directed? This project will undoubtedly leave readers with many questions such as these— and I think it should. This work and these questions do not end here, nor should they.

As a lifelong Nashvillian, I wanted to use this opportunity to create a snapshot of the city as it is today; not only the frustrating, unjust, unrecognizable changes, but also the strength, unity, and community building that is stemming from these changes. It’s

incredibly important to bring attention to the activism and coalition building that is occurring in the city in order to make it clear that urban development is a constantly evolving process, and that the pendulum swings both ways. It is crucial to give more power to the people as the city develops— to highlight the statement from the Edgehill State of Emergency group again; cities need development that happens *with* its residents, not *to* them.

I suppose this idea could be viewed as the crux of my whole thesis. When examined through a closer lens, urban development that occurs seemingly thoughtlessly actually has a whole lot of intention behind it. It is easy for civilians to forget or even take for granted the careful planning that goes into zoning and development, let alone things as small as sidewalks, stoplights, or crosswalks. At their core, though, these decisions are all made with a great amount of intention— the key in the case of Nashville is to examine what these intentions are. At the moment, wealthy developers and investors are prioritizing the accrual of wealth and the marketing of Nashville in a way that brings in notoriety and tourist traffic in their development strategies rather than the wellbeing of long term residents, and particularly Black and low-income residents. This is the thought process that must shift in order to build a more just city for all.

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